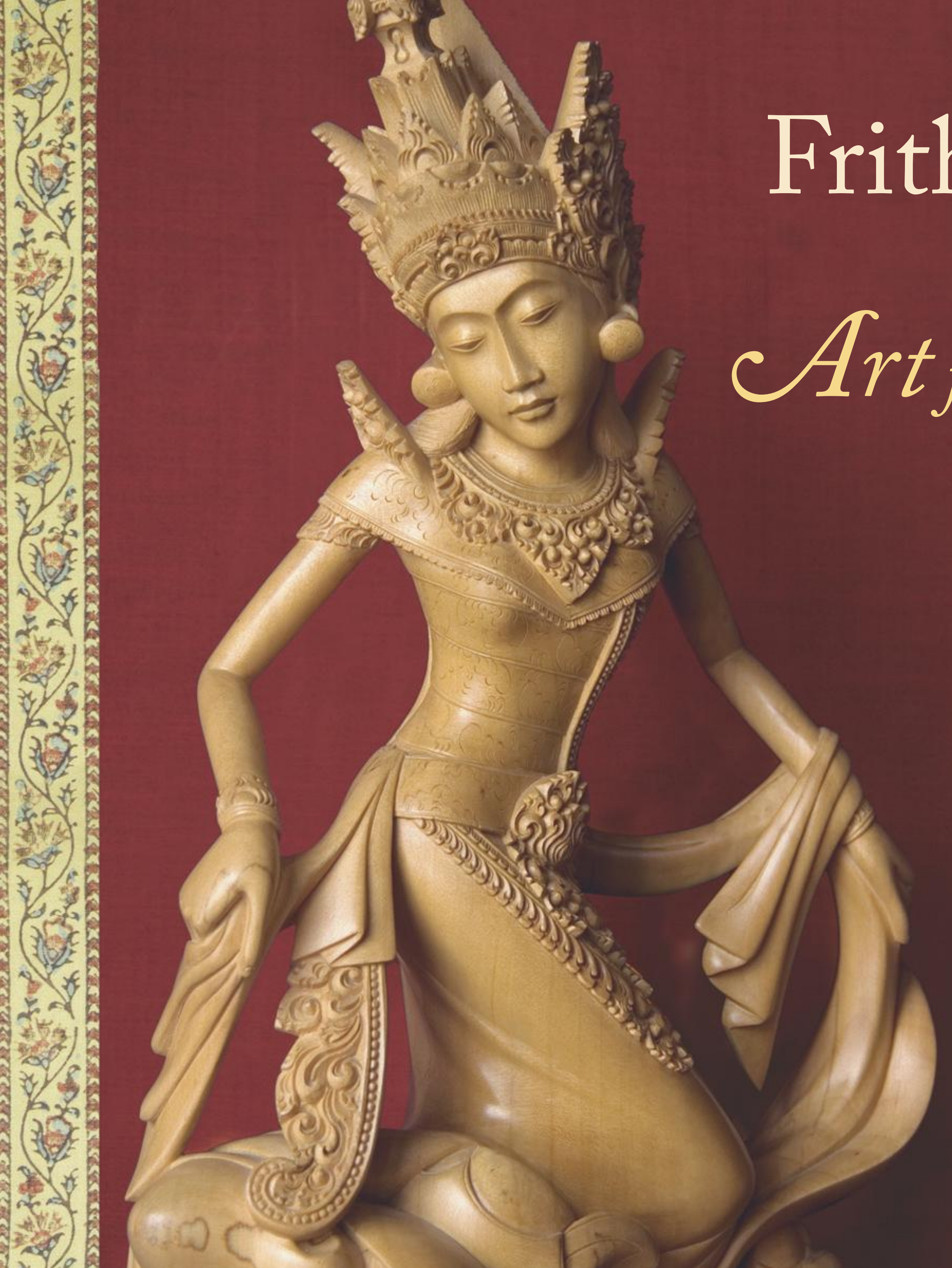

Frithjof Schuon

Art from the Sacred to the Profane
East and West

Edited by
Catherine Schuon

Foreword by
Keith Critchlow

World Wisdom
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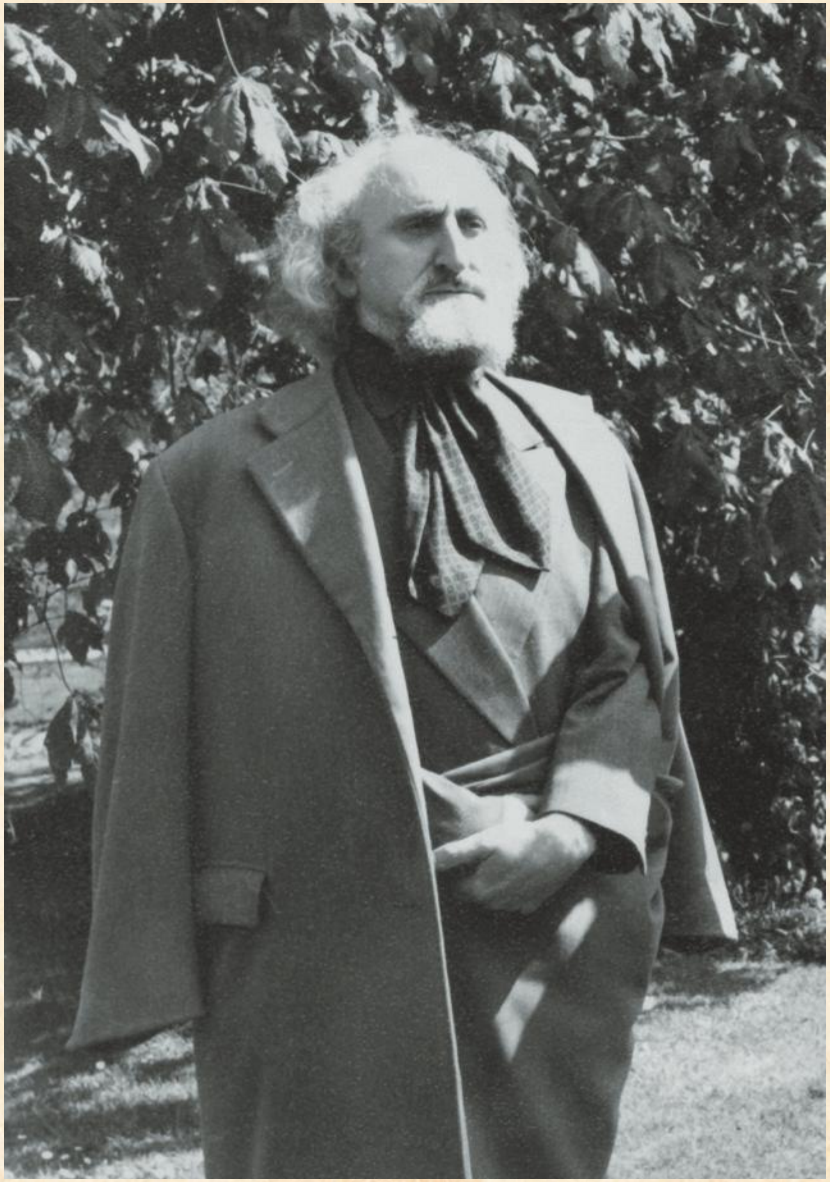

Frithjof Schuon in 1964

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Introduction by Barbara Perry

World Wisdom

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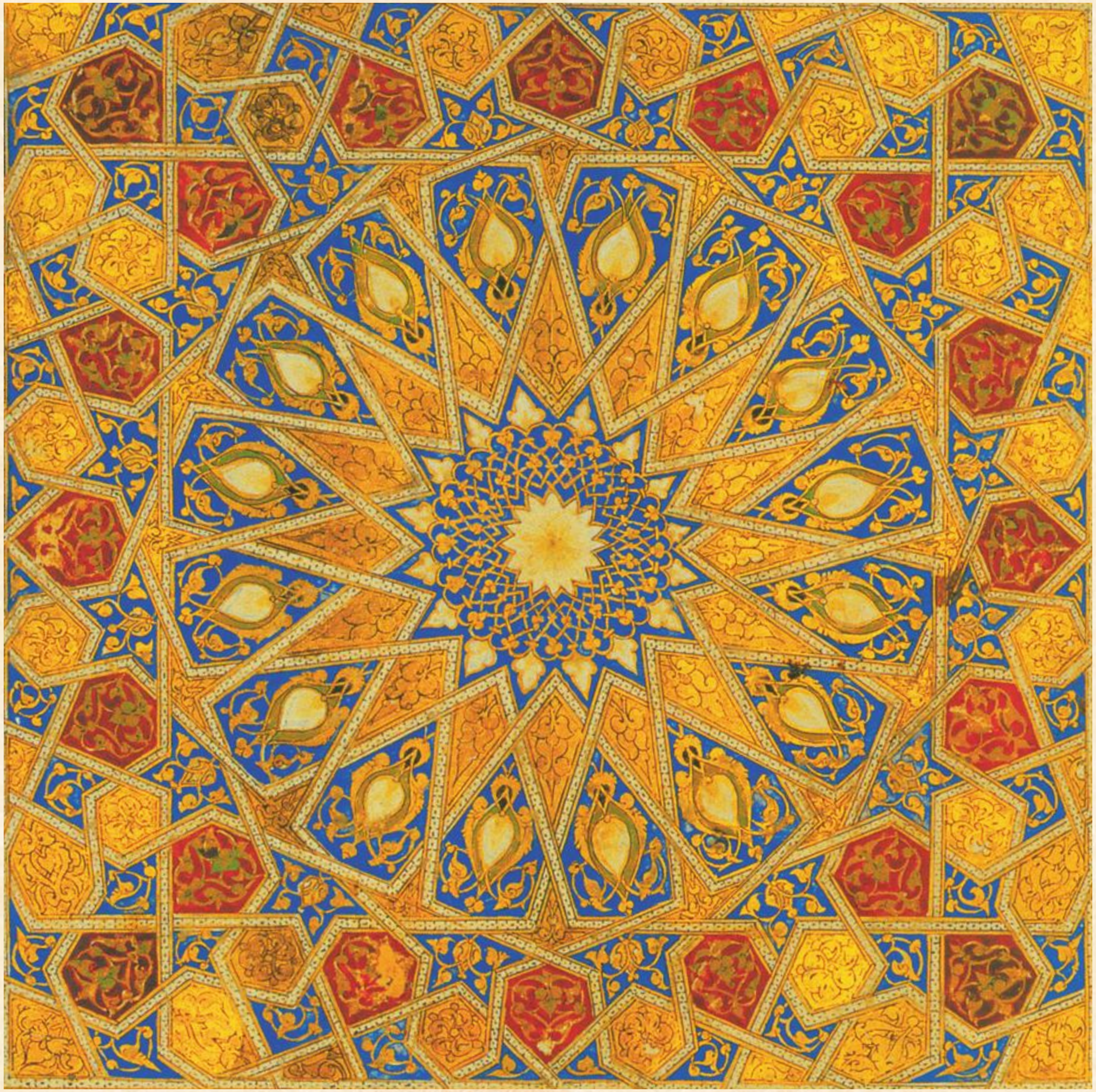


1. Detail from a frontispiece of a Koran written and illuminated for Arghun Shah al-Ashrafi, Cairo, 14th century

Foreword

This book will delight, intrigue, and nourish the soul of the fortunate reader. Frithjof Schuon, on the basis of the fact that man is himself "made in the image of God," proceeds to unfold the three-fold blessings of what it means to be human: "We can think, speak, and produce works of art," and these unique qualities enable us to "contemplate and realize the Infinite."

The author is, without doubt, one of the most penetrating philosophical minds of the twentieth century, if not well beyond. His references take us up through the hierarchies of the earthly states to the angelic sources of inspiration.

Frithjof Schuon immediately introduces us to an objective view of the arts, and leaves opinion behind, reminding us of a story told about Plato. One of Plato's students, it is said, asked him towards the end of his life, "What is it that you have attempted to achieve in your life's work?" and Plato replied, after due consideration, "to have raised human debate above the level of opinion." There is no doubt in this writer's mind that Schuon has offered us a similar ideal in the words contained in this book.

Universality in the arts cannot be removed from the universality of being human. However, even this last value and the questioning of its deepest meaning are woefully neglected by the majority of authors in our time. The fact that, unique amongst God's creatures, we can "think, speak, and produce works of art," with all the breadth and depth that these words imply, means that we have access to Eternity at any moment. It could even be said that it is the very universality of these arts that lies beyond passing time and is itself in the transcendent domain of Eternity.

When reason and faith have achieved a marriage in the story of mankind, great works have been achieved. It is within this marriage that logical reasoning is transcended by *in*-sight, *in*-tuition, and *in*-spiration. Each of these words, by their very etymology, *re*-cognize the inner nature of direct cognition or *in*-tellection.

Art is "doing"—that is, manifesting the outpourings of insight, intuition, and inspiration. Tradition in the arts is its bulwark and protection against a deterioration into personal contention, opinion, and hedonism.

This beautiful book, whose words and images have been so lovingly and discriminatingly assembled by Catherine Schuon, has the broadest coverage of any of the books on art that this writer has seen in forty years of teaching art and architecture. It should become *the* fundamental reference book for all comprehensive teaching of the visual arts, anywhere in the world. However, it will not always read comfortably with those who hold their particular historical views and ideas about the "Primitive" rather than "Primary" or "Primordial." It is, rather, for the serious reader, the contemplative reader, as well as the reader who delights in the love of "Beauty Itself."

Frithjof Schuon allows us an immediacy of vision of the central purpose of the arts: at best, they place us in the presence of timeless Being, that Being which sustains and gives reality to our source and our destiny.

Keith Critchlow
Professor Emeritus
The Prince's School of Traditional Arts

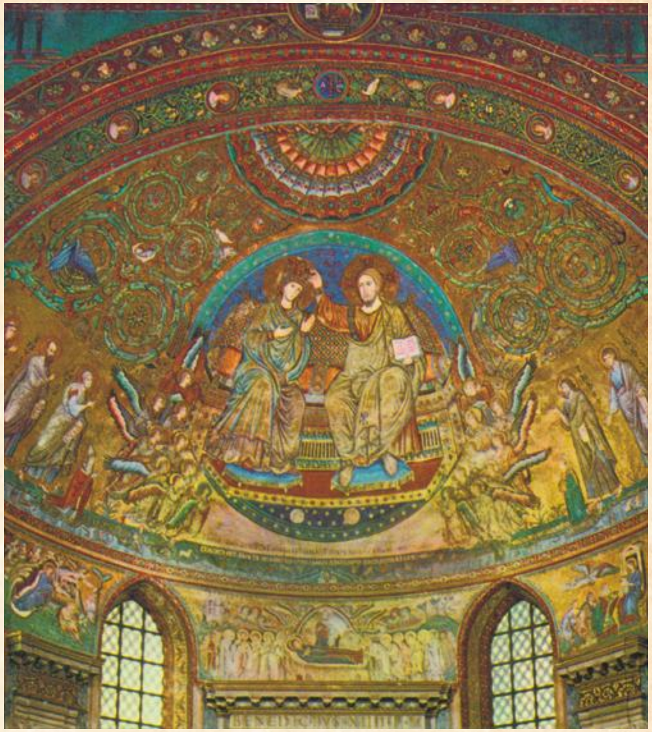
2. Entrance hall of the Sainte Chapelle, Paris, 13th century

Preface

From my earlier years I was always attracted to Gothic or Romanesque churches and I would not hesitate to walk several miles to attend Sunday services in these sanctuaries. Now my grandmother, who was a great art lover and admired almost every art (except surrealism), wanted to widen my horizon and get me out of my "narrow-mindedness" by inviting me to Rome when I was twenty. There again I was especially captivated by the beautiful Byzantine mosaics in the old churches and lamented the Baroque or Renaissance entrances and statues that had been added to them. The Church of Saint Peter, although one might be impressed by its dimensions, left me completely cold and in the Sistine Chapel I was rather horrified by the painting of the Last Judgment and felt sorry for Michelangelo that he had to decorate the ceiling with his muscular biblical personages while lying on his back [see ills. 91-92]. I am not denying that Michelangelo was a genius, but would it not have been more appropriate for a church to leave the blue ceiling with golden stars, as it was before? And as it still is in many old churches and especially in the entrance hall of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris where one is immediately seized by reverential marveling? The whole Vatican seemed to me more like a museum of paintings and sculptures than a sanctuary, so little there was conducive to prayer or recollection.

These were my impressions, but I never asked myself: why is that so? And I thought, like everybody else, that this was just my personal, even if limited, taste; until I read the first of Frithjof Schuon's books, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, where the chapter on art made everything clear to me; and then of course, living and traveling with him was a consistent application of the principles and criteria he had laid out, a constant discernment between truth and error, the beautiful and the ugly, the acceptable and the unacceptable, on all planes.

Thus, when Michael Fitzgerald—Chairman of World Wisdom—asked me to prepare a book on art with texts by my husband, I was delighted to do so. But since I was restricted in the number of pages and the size of the book,



3. Mosaic of the apse, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, 6th century

4. Mosaic of the apse, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, 12th century

not all the different arts of the world could be given special attention; however, separate chapters on the arts of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism seemed necessary because of the amount of writings that Schuon devoted to the art of these religions.

This was not as simple as one might think, since Schuon often writes in the same chapter or even in the same paragraph about the various arts, so that I had to carefully select sentences or passages from different works to accomplish my aim.

Also, when re-reading his books, I came upon precious passages related to beauty and the sense of the sacred which could not be omitted, and others on poetry, music, and dance, and finally on the less thought-of arts of dress and ambience. So, a chapter on each of these is here included.

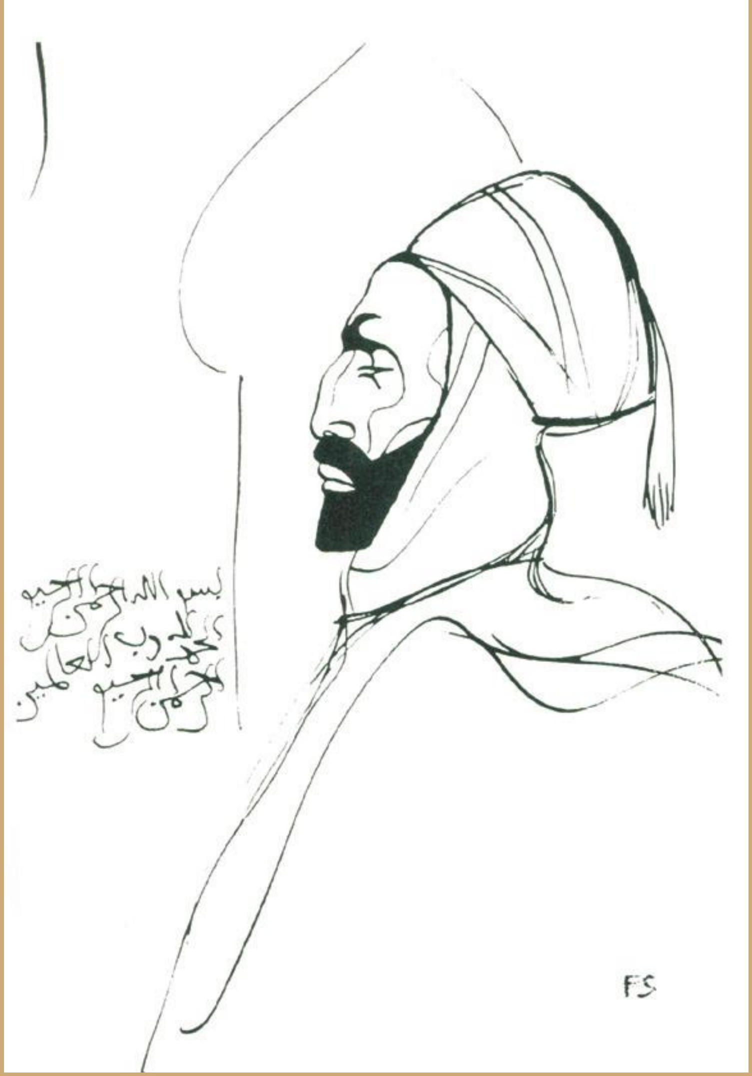
As for the illustrations, I wished to illustrate as far as possible everything Schuon is referring to; in this, the innumerable documents and books he had accumulated during his long life were a great help.

A last remark: Schuon often quotes in a note a particular masterpiece or some little-known work of art seemingly unrelated to the specific subject treated, but which in fact corroborates a point he makes in the main text. Thus, in the same section the reader will sometimes find quite unexpected illustrations, or a work of traditional sacred art confronted with a naturalistic work of art for comparison (as can be seen right here in the Preface). At any rate, in order to understand the arrangement of the illustrations one ought to read the text.

I hope that this book will help the reader to learn more about the various kinds of art and to open his heart to the irreplaceable beauty of traditional and sacred art.

Catherine Schuon

5. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, Rome, 1537-1541



6-7. Sketches by Frithjof Schuon, 1936 and 1933

Introduction

It is rare indeed to encounter a man who is at one and the same time a great thinker and a great artist. In most cases, a genius for intellectual discernment and the formulation of doctrine is exclusive of a genius for aesthetic perception and artistic creation, and this for the simple reason that the phenomenon of genius normally exhausts itself in a single domain. With Frithjof Schuon, however, the two capacities are bound together: his art is a manifestation of intellectual discernment, and his discernment possesses a quality both moral and aesthetic.

Schuon's intellectual point of departure is the discrimination between the Absolute and the Relative, or between *Ātmā* and *Māyā*, as the Vedantists would say. Knowledge does not derive from reasoning grafted onto physical and psychological experience; on the contrary, it has its source in the pure intellect, which contains all metaphysical and cosmological ideas in its very substance. Man has access to them in principle through "Platonic recollection"; in fact, however, most men are exiled from their spiritual root, so that they must receive the Truth from the outside, through spiritual practice as well as through doctrine.

The artistic side, with Schuon, springs from a consciousness of universal symbolism; for God manifests His Qualities through beauty. There is the beauty of virgin nature and of man and of art; genuine and legitimate art always has something of the sacred in it, whether directly or indirectly. Man lives by Truth and by Beauty; Schuon writes books and paints pictures. His books express the metaphysical doctrine in which all the religious systems and all the spiritual methods have their origin; he thus takes his stand in the perspective of the *philosophia perennis*.

Much of Schuon's intellectual knowledge may be accounted for in terms of his extraordinary aesthetic intuition. It suffices for him to see—in a museum, for example—an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of "chain reaction," a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual, and psychological ideas. An important point in his doctrine is that beauty is not a matter of taste, but an objective and hence obligating reality; the human right to personal affinity—or to "natural selection," if one likes—is altogether independent from aesthetic discrimination, that is to say from the understanding of forms.

Frithjof Schuon was born in Basle, Switzerland, on June 18, 1907. His father, a concert violinist and teacher at the Basle Conservatory of Music, was a native of southern Germany, while his mother came from an Alsatian family of German stock. Until the age of thirteen Schuon lived in Basle, but the untimely death of his father obliged his mother, for reasons of economy, to return with her two young sons to her family in Mulhouse; and thus it was that Schuon received a French-language education in addition to his German one. At sixteen, Schuon left school to become self-supporting as a textile designer—a type of work which made only the most modest of demands upon the remarkable artistic talent that he had as yet little opportunity to develop. As a child he had already taken much pleasure in drawing and painting, but he never received any formal training in the arts.

Schuon began very young his search for metaphysical truth, and this urge for understanding led him to read not only all

the classical and modern European philosophers but also the sacred doctrines of the East, notably those of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. In Western philosophy it was above all Plato and Eckhart who awakened an echo in his thought. Among Eastern writings, the *Bhagavad Gītā* was his favorite reading.

Parallel to his interest in philosophy was his love of traditional art; here the painting and sculpture of Japan held a preeminent place in his esteem. He was from his earliest years fascinated by all that was sacred, and his first meeting with a representation of the Buddha in the Ethnological Museum of Basle, made a profound impression on him.

In the Mulhouse period, Schuon came upon the writings of René Guénon, which served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilization while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications.

As a young man, Schuon went through a year-and-a-half of compulsory military service in France, then worked again as a designer in Paris. He took lessons in Arabic at the Paris mosque and in 1932 Schuon spent several months in Algeria where he met the famous Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi, who introduced him to Sufism. After his second stay there in 1935 he went on to visit Morocco where the still traditional way of life greatly impressed him. In 1938, he went to Cairo in order to meet Guénon, with whom he had been in correspondence for the past six years. He saw Guénon again a year later as he passed through Egypt on his way to India, a country with whose contemplative climate he had always felt a strong affinity. However, the Second World War broke out, obliging him to return to Europe after only a few days' stay in Bombay. He was, by law, obliged to join the French army as a soldier. Captured by the Germans, he was allowed a certain freedom by virtue of his Alsatian background, but when it appeared likely that the Nazis would oblige Alsatians to enter the German army, he seized the opportunity to escape to Switzerland where, after brief imprisonment, he was given asylum. Some years later, he obtained Swiss nationality.

Schuon settled in Lausanne and shortly thereafter began to write. His articles had begun to appear in *Études Traditionnelles*—a French review originally dedicated to the publishing of Guénon—as early as 1933. From 1963 on Schuon was also a regular contributor to the English review *Studies in Comparative Religion*. The first of his books—*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*—appeared in 1948 and was soon followed by *The Eye of the Heart* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*. These and his succeeding works were written in French. Earlier he had published a book in German entitled *Primordial Meditation*, as well as two volumes of lyric poetry, also written in his native German. There are now more than two dozen books which have been printed in English, and his works appear in twelve different languages.

In 1949, Schuon married Catherine Feer, of Swiss origin, German-speaking like himself, but educated in French from the age of thirteen and, also like himself, highly gifted for painting. It was after his marriage that Schuon began to paint regularly, devoting most of his canvases to depictions of American Indians in their traditional setting. As a boy, Schuon had heard much about the Indians from his paternal grandmother, who as a young girl had spent some time in the city of Washington. There she had become acquainted with a Sioux member of a delegation of chiefs to the nation's capital, and although she did not accept his offer of marriage, she never forgot her Indian friend and later transmitted her love and admiration for the Indians to her grandchildren.

Schuon met and made friends with several members of the Crow tribe in Paris in the winter of 1953. They had come to Europe to give performances in a troupe under the auspices of Reginald Laubin and his wife, the well-known performers and preservers of traditional American Indian dances. After Paris, several of the group came to Lausanne for a week in order to visit the Schuons—notably Thomas Yellowtail, who later became an important medicine man and a leader of the Sun Dance religion. Five years later, the Schuons traveled to Brussels in order to meet the Sioux who had come to give Wild West performances in connection with the World's Fair.

These meetings paved the way for the Schuons' first visit to America, in the summer of 1959. In the company of Indian friends they visited many regions of the Plains and had the opportunity to attend a Sun Dance at Fort Hall, Idaho, on the Shoshone-Bannock reservation. When at Pine Ridge, the Schuons were adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud, a grandson of the great chief known to history, and later, at an Indian festival in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Schuons were officially received into the Sioux tribe.

In the spring of 1965, Schuon made the first of a series of regular trips to Morocco. He sailed to Turkey in the spring of 1968, where he visited Istanbul, Bursa, and Kusadasi—this last in order to permit a number of visits to the House of the Blessed Virgin in its peaceful mountainside setting above Ephesus.

In 1980 the Schuons moved from Switzerland to the United States. Schuon rarely traveled during the last eighteen years of his life there, but a stream of friends and admirers regularly came to visit him in his secluded home in Bloomington, Indiana. His old friend, Thomas Yellowtail, came to Indiana each autumn from 1980 until his death in 1993. He adopted Schuon into the Crow tribe on one of his annual visits in 1984.

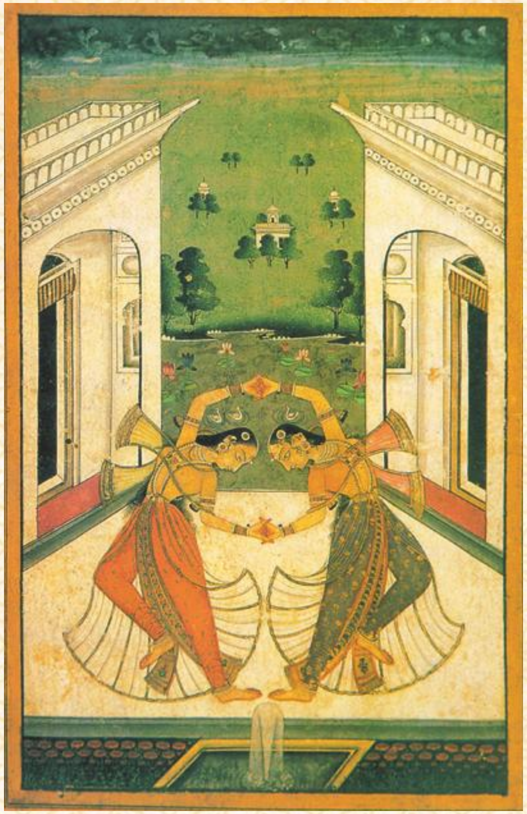
The last three years of Schuon's life were a time for an outpouring of more than 3200 German-language poems—the final crown on his remarkable written corpus comprising, besides his books, countless letters and texts on the spiritual life.

Frithjof Schuon died peacefully at his home in May 1998 at the age of ninety.

Since four of Schuon's paintings are included as illustrations, a remark is necessary about his work as a painter. In his paintings, Schuon's intention is to express inward truths, or higher realities as lived through the medium of his own soul, and he does so by means of human portraits and scenes taken for the most part from the life of the Plains Indians. He also painted pictures of the Virgin-Mother, not in the style of Christian icons but in the form of the Biblical Shulamite or the Hindu Shakti. His artistic works combine traditional rules with a kind of intellectual rigor and an adequate observation of nature which gives them a powerful originality and exceptional expressiveness.

From the time of his earliest childhood Schuon has been drawn to four things: the great, the beautiful, the childlike, and above all, the sacred. Much in his writings and art and in his life itself can best be understood in terms of this quaternity.

Barbara Perry
April 2006, Bloomington, Indiana



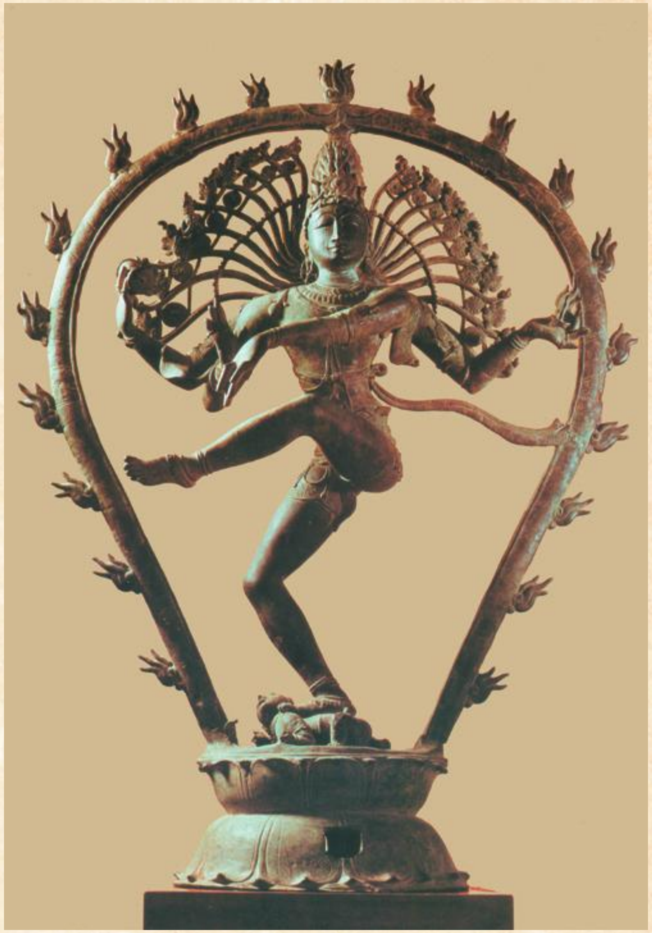
8. Miniature from the medieval Book of Hours, *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc De Berry*, early 15th century
9. Kitagawa Utamaro, *Musician and Edo Flowers*, c. 1806
10. Indian miniature, Deccan, Hyderabad, 18th century

Principles and Criteria of Art

The fundamental importance of art both in the life of a collectivity and in the contemplative life, arises from the fact that man is himself "made in the image of God": only man is such a direct image, in the sense that his form is an "axial" and "ascendant" perfection and his content a totality. Man by his theomorphism is at the same time a work of art and also an artist; a work of art because he is an "image," and an artist because this image is that of the divine Artist. Man alone among earthly beings can think, speak, and produce works; only he can contemplate and realize the Infinite. Human art, like divine Art, includes both determinate and indeterminate aspects, aspects of necessity and of freedom, of rigor and of joy.

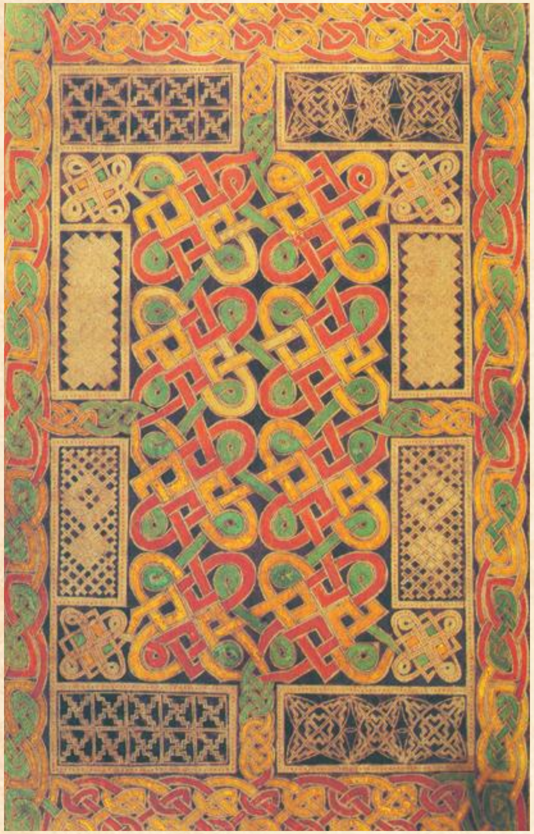
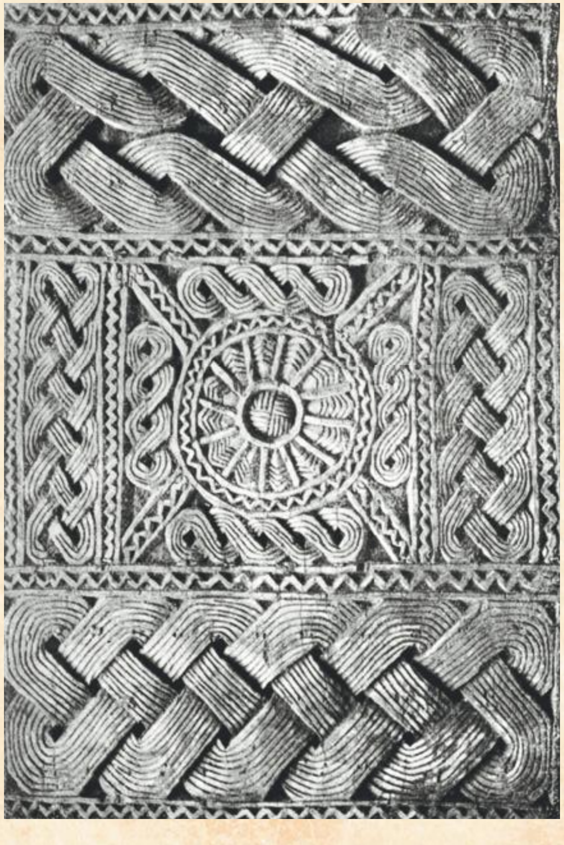
This cosmic polarity enables us to establish a primary distinction, namely the distinction between sacred and profane art: in sacred art what takes precedence over everything else is the content and use of the work; whereas in profane art these are but a pretext for the joys of creation. If within the framework of a traditional civilization art doubtless is never wholly profane, it may however become relatively so precisely because its motive force is to be found less in symbolism than in the creative instinct; such art is thus profane through the absence of a sacred subject or a spiritual symbolism but traditional through the formal discipline that governs its style.[1]

The position of non-traditional art is quite different: here there can be no question of sacred art and at most it may be called profane religious art; moreover the motive of such art is "passional" in the sense that an individualistic and undisciplined sentimentality is placed at the service of religious belief. Whether profane art is naturalistic and "religious," like Christian art of modern times, or both traditional and worldly, like medieval European or



11. Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, South India, 10th century

[1] In Masonic terminology God is "The Great Architect of the Universe," but He is also a painter, sculptor, musician, and poet; there is a Hindu symbolism which represents Him as creating and destroying the worlds as He dances [see ill. 11].

Top left: **12**. Picture-stone from the island of Gotland, Sweden, 5th century; *Top center*: **13.** Top of brass-plated wooden seat from Benin, Nigeria, c. 15th century; *Top right*: **14**. Processional cross from Lalibela, Ethiopia; *Bottom left*: **15**. *Carpet Page*, the Book of Durrow, Ireland, late 7th century; *Bottom center*: **16**. Carved wooden board from Benin, Nigeria; *Bottom right*: **17**. Processional cross from Ethiopia

Indo-Persian miniatures or Japanese wood-cuts [see ills. 8, 9, and 10], it often presupposes an extra-sacerdotal point of view and so a worldliness such as makes its appearance at a relatively late stage in the theocratic civilizations. In primordial periods art always was limited to either objects of ritual use or working tools and household objects [see ills. 18 and 19], but even such tools and objects were, like the activities they implied, eminently symbolical and so connected with ritual and with the realm of the sacred.

If sacred art expresses what is spiritual either directly or indirectly, profane art must also express some value, unless it is to lose all legitimacy; the value it expresses, apart from the value of which every traditional style is the vehicle, is, first, the cosmic quality of its content and, secondly, the virtue and intelligence of the artist. Here it is therefore the subjective value of the man which predominates, but—and this is essential—that value is determined by the sacred, by the fact that the artist is integrated into a traditional civilization the genius of which he inevitably expresses; in other words, he makes himself the exponent, not only of personal, but also of collective values, since both alike are determined by the tradition in question. The genius is at the same time traditional and collective, spiritual and racial, and then personal; personal genius is nothing without the concurrence of a deeper and wider genius. Sacred art represents above all the spirit, and profane art the collective soul or genius, but this of course presupposes that it is integrated into the tradition. Taken together spiritual and collective genius make up traditional genius which gives its imprint to the whole civilization.[2]

18. Contemporary wooden chest from Afghanistan
19. Brass-plated wooden seat from Benin, Niger, c. 15th century

[2] In traditional art are to be found creations—or rather what might well be called revelations—which may appear unimportant to those who are prejudiced in favor of individual "masterpieces" as well as from the standpoint of the "classical" categories of art; but these creations are nonetheless among the irreplaceable works of human genius. Such are the Nordic decorations, so rich in primordial symbols, the motifs of which are also to be found in the folk art of most European countries, in Asia, and indeed even in the depths of the Sahara; such also are the Abyssinian processional crosses, the Shinto toriis, the majestic eagle-feather headdresses of the American Indians, and the Hindu saris in which splendid dignity is combined with grace.

20. Torii of Miyajima, near Hiroshima, Japan

Before going further we should perhaps define the term "sacred"; what then is the sacred in relation to the world? It is the interference of the uncreate in the created, of the eternal in time, of the infinite in space, of the supraformal in forms; it is the mysterious introduction into one realm of existence of a presence which in reality contains and transcends that realm and could cause it to burst asunder in a sort of divine explosion. The sacred is the incommensurable, the transcendent, hidden within a fragile form belonging to this world; it has its own precise rules, its terrible aspects, and its merciful qualities; moreover any violation of the sacred, even in art, has incalculable repercussions. Intrinsically the sacred is inviolable, and so much so that any attempted violation recoils on the head of the violator.

The supernatural value of sacred art arises from the fact that it conveys and communicates an intelligence which is lacking in the collectivity. Like virgin nature it has a quality and function of intelligence which it manifests through beauty because in essence it belongs to the formal order; sacred art is the form of the Supraformal, it is the image of

the Uncreate, the language of Silence. But as soon as artistic initiative becomes detached from tradition, which links it to the sacred, this guarantee of intelligence fails and stupidity shows through everywhere: aestheticism is moreover the very last thing that can preserve us from this danger.

An art is sacred, not through the personal intention of the artist, but through its content, its symbolism, and its style, that is, through objective elements. By its content: the subject represented must be as prescribed either when following a canonical model or in a wider sense; always, however, it must be canonically determined. By its symbolism: the sacred personage, or the anthropomorphic symbol, must be clothed or adorned in a given manner and not differently and may be making certain gestures but not others. By its style: the image must be expressed in a particular hieratic formal language and not in some foreign or imagined style. In brief, the image must be sacred in its content, symbolical in its detail, and hieratic in its treatment; otherwise it will be lacking in spiritual truth, in liturgical quality, and—for all the more reason—in sacramental character. On pain of losing all right to existence, art has no right to infringe these rules and has the less interest in doing so since these seeming restrictions confer on it, by their intellectual and aesthetic truth, qualities of depth and power such as the individual artist has very small chance of drawing out of himself.

Traditional art derives from a creativity which combines heavenly inspiration with ethnic genius, and which does so in the manner of a science endowed with rules and not by way of individual improvisation; *ars sine scientia nihil.*

Within the framework of a traditional civilization, there is as already mentioned a distinction to be made between sacred art and profane art. The purpose of the first is to communicate, on the one hand, spiritual truths and, on the other hand, a celestial presence; sacerdotal art has in principle a truly sacramental function. The function of profane art is obviously more modest: it consists in providing what theologians call "sensible consolations," with a view to an equilibrium conducive to the spiritual life, rather in the manner of

21. Zanabazar, Standing Maitreya, Mongolia, early 18th century

22. Katsushika Hokusai, *Choshi in Shimosa Province*, c. 1852
23. Kitagawa Utamaro, *Tales from Ise*, Edo period, c. 1796

the flowers and birds in a garden. The purpose of art of every kind—and this includes craftsmanship—is to create a climate and forge a mentality; it thus rejoins, directly or indirectly, the function of interiorizing contemplation, the Hindu *darshan*: contemplation of a holy man, of a sacred place, of a venerable object, of a Divine image.

Sacred art is vertical and ascending, whereas profane art is horizontal and equilibrating. In the beginning, nothing was profane; each tool was a symbol, and even decoration was symbolistic and sacral. With the passage of time, however, the imagination increasingly spread itself on the earthly plane, and man felt the need for an art that was for him and not for Heaven alone; the earth too, which in the beginning was experienced as a prolongation or an image of Heaven, progressively became earth pure and simple, that is to say that the human being increasingly felt himself to possess the right to be merely human. If religion tolerates this art, it is because it nevertheless has its legitimate function in the economy of spiritual means, within the horizontal or earthly dimension, and with the vertical or heavenly dimension in view.

However, it must be reiterated here that the distinction between a sacred and a profane art is inadequate and too precipitate when one wishes to take account of all artistic possibilities;[3] and it is therefore necessary to have recourse to a supplementary distinction, namely that between a liturgical and an extra-liturgical art: in the first, although in principle it coincides with sacred art, there may be modalities that are more or less profane, just as inversely, extra-liturgical art may comprise some sacred manifestations.

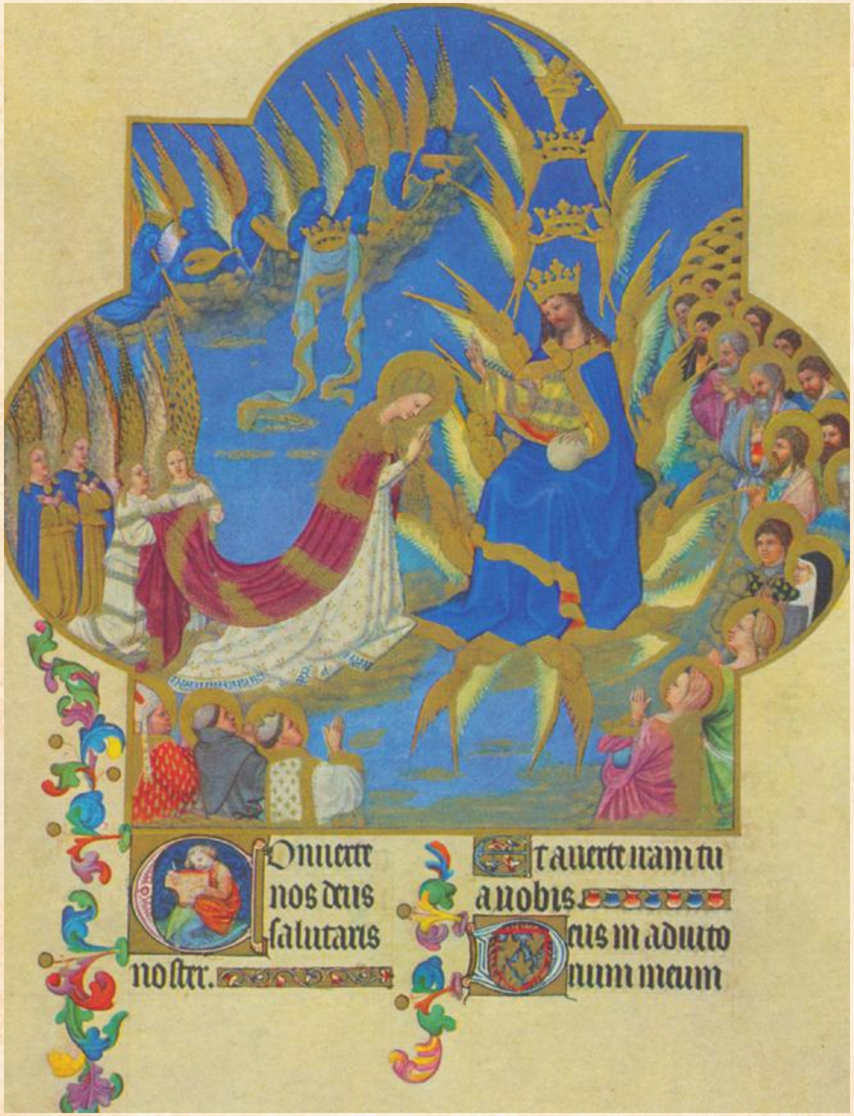
Sacred art is far from always being perfect, although it is necessarily so in its principles and in the best of its productions; nevertheless in the great majority of imperfect works, the principles compensate for the accidental weak-

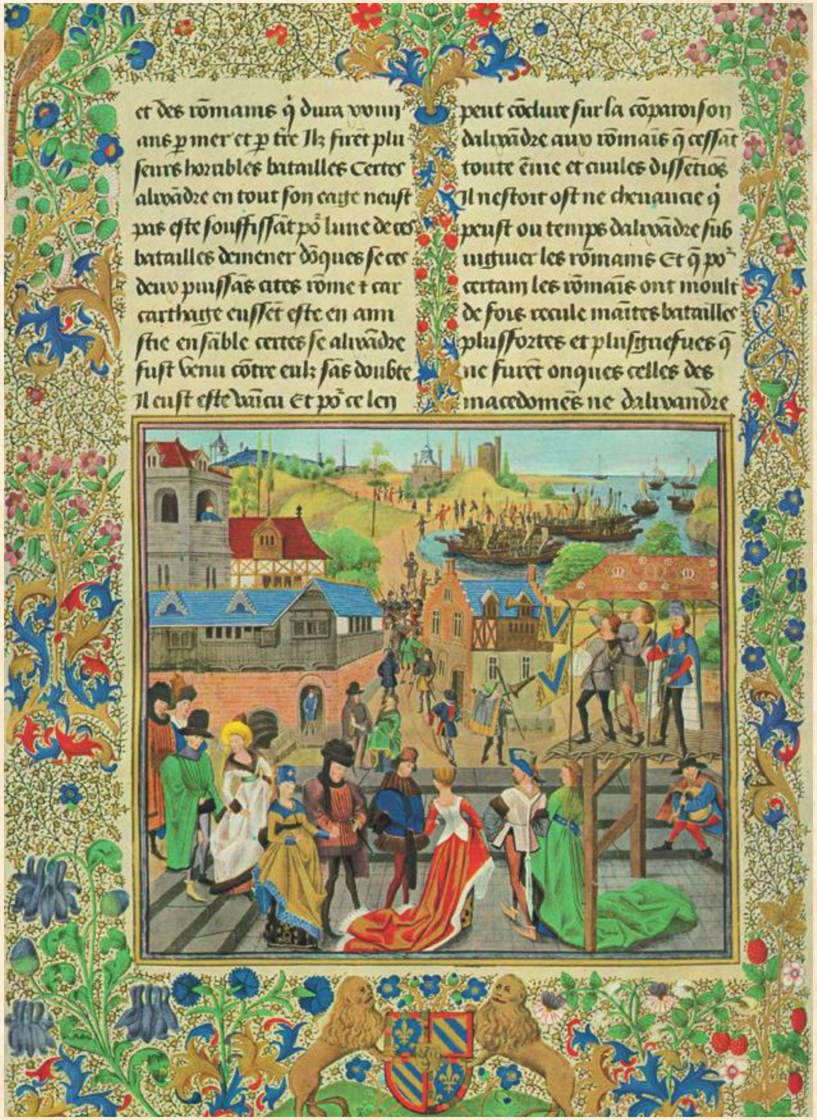
[3] Traditional profane art never loses all contact with the sacred; in the prints of a Hokusai, an Utamaro, or a Hiroshige, there exists something contemplative and rigorous which makes one think of Zen and Taoism; the same holds true—*a fortiori* perhaps—for tools, clothing, houses, where the sacred and profane are often intimately linked. The primitive tool is often a revelation and a symbol and thus also a "spiritual instrument."

nesses, rather as gold, from a certain point of view, can compensate for the but slight artistic value of a given object. Two pitfalls lie in wait for sacred art and for traditional art in general: a virtuosity tending towards the outward and the superficial, and a conventionalism without intelligence and without soul; but this, it must be stressed, rarely deprives sacred art of its overall efficacy, and in particular of its capacity to create a stabilizing and interiorizing atmosphere. As for imperfection, one of its causes can be the inexperience, if not the incompetence of the artist; the most primitive works are rarely the most perfect, for in the history of art there are periods of apprenticeship just as later there are periods of decadence, the latter often being due to virtuosity. Another cause of imperfection is unintelligence, either individual or collective: the image may be lacking in quality because the artist—the word here having an approximate meaning—is lacking in intelligence or spirituality, but it may likewise bear the imprint of a certain collective unintelligence that comes from the sentimental conventionalization of the common religion; in this case, the collective psychism clothes the spiritual element with a kind of "pious stupidity," for if there is a naïveté that is charming, there is also a naïveté that is moralistic and irritating. This must be said lest anyone should think that artistic expressions of the sacred dispense us from discernment and oblige us to be prejudiced, and so that no one should forget that in the traditional domain in general, there is on all planes a constant struggle between a solidifying tendency and a tendency towards transparency which draws the psychic back to the spiritual. All of this may be summed up by saying that sacred art is sacred in itself, but that it is not necessarily so in all its expressions.

The rights of art, or more exactly of the artist, lie in the technical, spiritual, and intellectual qualities of the work; these three qualities are so many modes of originality. In other words the artist can be original through the aesthetic quality of his work, by the nobility or piety reflected in it, and by the intelligence or knowledge which enables him to find inexhaustible variations within

24. Katsushika Hokusai, *Tama River in the Province of Musashi*, c. 1831; **25**. Ando Hiroshige, *Shisaku in Iki Province*, 1853-1856





26. *Coronation of the Virgin*, miniature from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, early 15th century
27. Jean Manset, miniature from *Histoires Romaines*, 15th century

the framework laid down by tradition. All sacred art proves that this framework is relatively wide: it does indeed restrict incapacity but not either talent or intelligence. True genius can develop without making innovations: it attains perfection, depth, and power of expression almost imperceptibly by means of the imponderables of truth and beauty ripened in that humility without which there can be no true greatness. From the point of view of sacred art or even from that of merely traditional art, to know whether a work is an original or a copy is a matter of no concern: in a series of copies of a single canonical model one of them, which may be less "original" than some other, is a work of genius through a concatenation of precious conditions which have nothing to do with any affectation of originality or other mind-set of the ego.

Apart from its function as a direct aid to spirituality, sacred art is indispensable as a support for the intelligence of the collectivity: to abolish sacred art as was done in the Renaissance, or in Greece in the fifth century B.C., is to abolish that intelligence—one might say that intellectuality—and so to give free rein to a sensibility that is passional and henceforth ungovernable.[4] Moreover the theological function of religious art must not be overlooked: art should by its determinate aspects teach revealed truths, that is, by its types or models, and it should suggest spiritual perfumes by subtle aspects which will depend on the intuition of the artist. Now, naturalistic religious art makes truth hard to believe and virtue odious for the simple reason that in it truth is overwhelmed by the stridency of a necessarily false description and virtue is drowned in an almost unavoidable hypocrisy; naturalism compels the artist to represent what he could not have seen as if he had seen it, and to manifest sublime virtue as if he himself possessed it [see ills. 31, 32, and 33].

28. Pope Gregory the Great writing while a dove, representing the Holy Ghost, dictates into his ear, *Registrum Gregorii*, c. 997

[4] It is, of course, the "collective intelligence" which is here in question, not intelligence in itself: Greek decadence did not affect the spirit of a man like Plato. If, however, the collective intelligence is compromised, that clearly will render the unfolding of particular intelligences more uncertain. What Greek decadence had destroyed, Christianity recreated to last for a thousand years.

29. A *Shiviti* with Psalm 67 in the shape of a Menorah, the Holy Land, 1869

This teaching function is also incumbent, though far less directly, on profane art when it is linked to the tradition by its style and by the mentality of the artist; in European medieval miniatures can be discerned an expression of the Christian spirit doubtless indirect, but nonetheless intelligible. The opportuneness of profane art is, however, psychological rather than spiritual, so that it always remains something of a two-edged sword or a "lesser ill" and one must not be surprised at the severe condemnations launched against profane art in periods still stamped with a sacerdotal outlook. Here as in other fields the functions of things may vary according to circumstances.

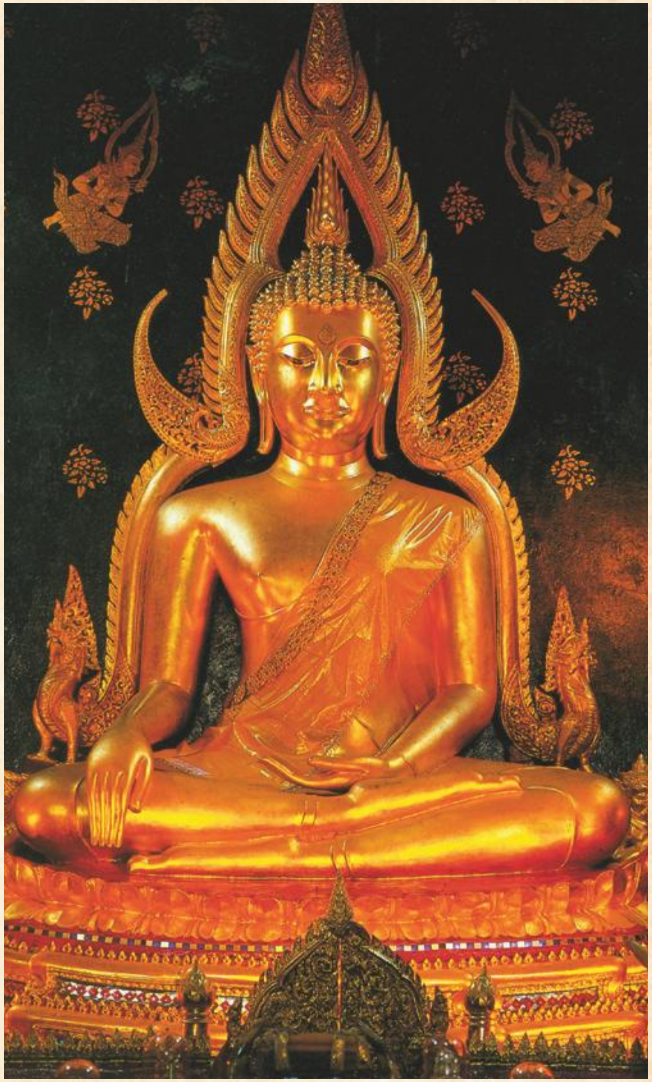
Scriptures, anagogy, and art are derived from Revelation, though at very different degrees. Scriptures are the direct expression of the Speech of Heaven, whereas anagogy is its inspired and indispensable commentary;[5] art constitutes as it were the extreme limit or material shell of the tradition and thus, by virtue of the law that "extremes meet," rejoins what is most inward in it, so that art is itself inseparable from inspiration. Anagogy is the vehicle for metaphysical and mystical intelligence—aside from its purely legal interpretation—whereas art is the support of the collective intelligence and is contingent to the same degree as is the collectivity as such. In other words, scriptural Revelation is accompanied by two secondary currents, the one inward and indispensable for contemplative men, the other outward and indispensable for the generality of people. For the sage there is no common measure between the commentary on Scripture and art; he may even do without the latter provided it be replaced by a void or by virgin nature and not by a falsified art. For the tradition as a whole, however, art assumes an importance almost as great as exegesis, since tradition cannot manifest itself apart from forms. Again, if the elite have far more need of exegesis than of art, the generality of people

[5] We are referring to essential commentaries whose inspiration, though secondary, is nonetheless a necessary concomitant of Revelation; other commentaries, whether metaphysical, mystical, or legal, may not be indispensable.

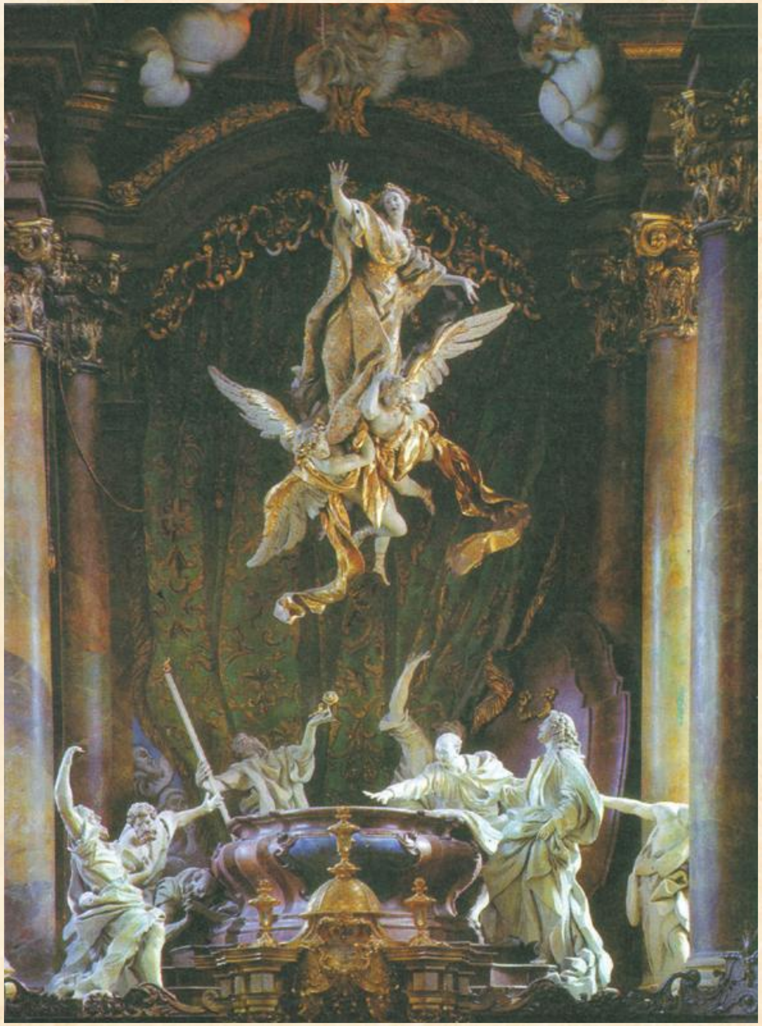
have on the contrary far more need of art than of metaphysical and mystical doctrines; but, since the elite depend "physically" on the whole collectivity, they too indirectly have need of art.

Commentary in the widest sense, however, comprises an aspect that is outward because it treats, among other things, of exoteric questions. Conversely, art has an aspect that is inward and profound by virtue of its symbolism; it then fulfills a different function and speaks directly to the contemplative mind: in this way it becomes a support for intellection, thanks to its non-mental, concrete, and direct language. Besides the metaphysical and mystical commentary on Scripture there is a legal and moral commentary addressed to the community as a whole, just as there is, besides the formal and collective function of art, a function that is strictly spiritual and esoteric. Seen from the latter point of view, art will be more inward and more profound than verbal expositions, and this explains the central function which a sacred image, such as that of the Buddha, can assume. There is a highly significant connection between the loss of a sacred art and the loss of anagogy, as is shown by the Renaissance: naturalism could not kill symbolism—sacred art—without humanism killing anagogy and, with it, *gnosis*. This is so because these two elements, anagogical science and symbolical art, are essentially related to pure intellectuality.

We have already seen that the definition, laws, and criteria of art cannot be derived from art itself, that is, from the competence of the artist as such; the foundations of art lie in the spirit, in metaphysical, theological, and mystical knowledge, not in knowledge of the craft alone nor yet in genius, for this may be just anything; in other words the intrinsic principles of art are essentially subordinate to extrinsic principles of a higher order. Art is an activity, an exteriorization, and thus depends by definition on a knowledge that transcends it and gives it order; apart from such knowledge, art has no justification: it is knowledge which determines action, manifestation, form, and not the reverse.



30. The Phra Buddha Jinnarat of Pitsanulok, Thailand, early 15th century



31. Pierre-Paul Rubens, *The Virgin Surrounded by Angels*, 17th century
32. Altar of the Church of Rohr, Bavaria, 18th century

What defenders of surrealist tendencies either forget or do not know is above all that forms, whether in pictures, in sculpture, in architecture, or in some other medium, arise from a hierarchy of cosmic values and translate either truths or errors so that there is no place here for adventuring; the psychological efficacy of forms, so beneficial when they are true, makes them on the contrary deadly if they are false.

When art ceases to be traditional and becomes human, individual, and therefore arbitrary, that is infallibly the sign—and secondarily the cause—of an intellectual decline, a weakening, which, in the sight of those who are skilled in the "discernment of spirits" and who look upon things with an unprejudiced eye, is expressed by the more or less incoherent and spiritually insignificant, we would go even as far as to say unintelligible character of the forms.

We are referring here to the decadence of certain branches of religious art during the Gothic period, especially in its latter part, and to Western art as a whole from the Renaissance onward: Christian art (architecture, sculpture, painting, liturgical goldsmithery, and so on) which formerly was sacred, symbolical, and spiritual, had to give way before the invasion of neo-antique and naturalistic, individualistic, and sentimental art [see ills. 31, 32, and 33]; this art, which contained absolutely nothing "miraculous"—no matter what those who believe in the "Greek miracle" may care to think—is quite unfitted for the transmission of intellectual intuitions and no longer answers to anything higher than collective psychic aspirations; it is thus as far removed as can be from intellectual contemplation and takes into consideration sentimentality only; moreover, sentimentality debases itself in the measure that it caters to the needs of the masses, until it ends in a saccharine and pathetic vulgarity. It is strange that no one has understood to what a degree this barbarism of forms, which reached a zenith of hollow and miserable boasting in the period of Louis XV, contributed—and still contributes—to driving many souls (and by no means the worst) away from the Church; they feel literally choked in surroundings that do not allow their intelligence room to breathe. Nothing is

33. Domenico Zampieri "Domenichino," *The Assumption*, 17th century

34. Tibetan *thangka* depicting a *stūpa* (reliquary) surrounded by eight *Mahābodhisattvas* and eight Goddesses carrying symbols, 18th century

able to offer to irreligion a more immediately tangible nourishment than the insipid hypocrisy of religious images; that which was meant to stimulate piety in the believer but serves to confirm unbelievers in their impiety, whereas it must be recognized that genuinely sacred art does not possess this character of a "two-edged sword," for being itself more abstract, it offers less hold to hostile psychological reactions.

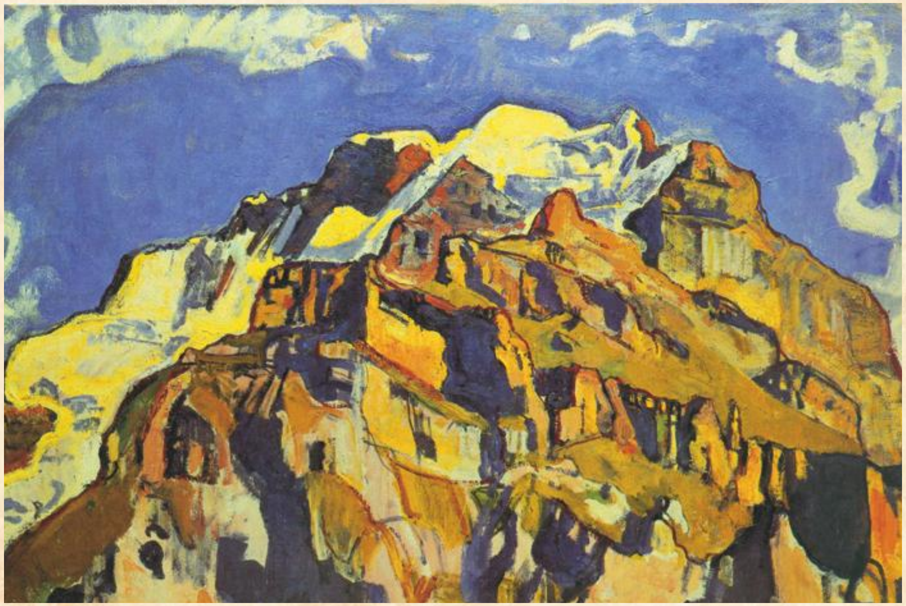
It is solely and exclusively traditional art [see ill. 34]—in the widest sense of the word, implying all that is of an externally formal order, and therefore *a fortiori* everything that belongs in some way or other to the ritual domain—it is only this art, transmitted with tradition and by tradition, that can guarantee the adequate analogical correspondence between the Divine and the cosmic orders, on the one hand, and the human or artistic order on the other. As a result, the traditional artist does not limit himself simply to imitating nature, but to "imitating nature in her manner of operation" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I. qu. 177, a. I) and it goes without saying that the artist cannot, with his own individual means, improvise such a cosmological operation. It is by the entirely adequate conformity of the artist to this "manner of operation," a conformity that is subordinated to the rules of tradition, that the masterpiece is created.

Thus forms, even the most unimportant, are the work of human hands in a secondary manner only; they originate first and foremost from the same suprahuman source from which all tradition originates, which is another way of saying that the artist who lives in a traditional world without fissures works under the discipline or the inspiration of a genius that surpasses him; fundamentally he is but the instrument of this genius, if only from the fact of his craftsman's qualification.

In a world where traditional art is dead, where consequently form itself is invaded by everything that is contrary to spirituality and where nearly every formal expression is corrupted at its very roots, the traditional regularity of forms takes on a very special spiritual importance that it could not have possessed at the beginning, since the absence of the spirit in forms was then inconceivable.

Let us, however, return to the plastic arts and add the following, which will at the same time serve as a conclusion: for contemporary artists and insofar as profane art is concerned, there can be no question of just "going back," for one never gets back to one's starting point; rather should the valid experiments of naturalism and impressionism be combined with the principles of normal and normalizing art as is in fact done by some artists who are in general little known; modern art—starting from the Renaissance—does include some more or less isolated works which, though they fit into the style of their period, are in a deeper sense opposed to it and neutralize its errors by their own qualities.[6] However, in the case of sacred art resort to canonical models and treatment is called for without reservation, for if there is in modern man an originality to which a human being may have a right, this will not fail to show itself within the framework of tradition, as already happened in the Middle Ages

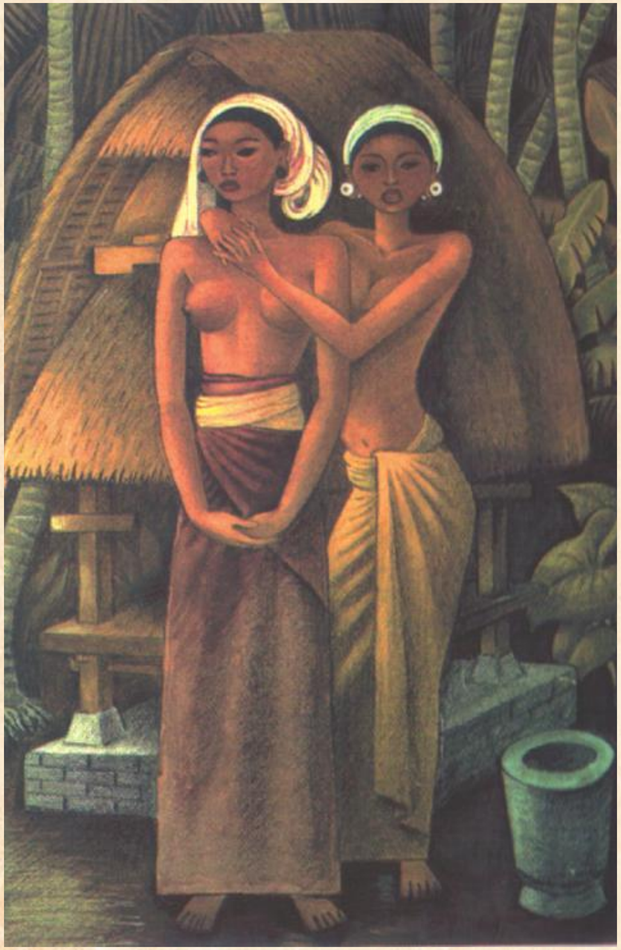
[6] Of famous or well-known painters the elder Brueghel's snow scenes may be quoted and, nearer to our day, Gauguin, some of whose canvases are almost perfect, Van Gogh's flower paintings, Douanier Rousseau with his exotic forests akin to folk painting, and, among our contemporaries, Covarrubias with his Mexican and Balinese subjects. We might perhaps also allude to certain American Indian painters whose work shows, through a naturalistic influence, a vision close to that of the ancient pictography. Conversely, equivalents of the positive experiments of modern art can be found in the most varied of traditional art, which proves not only that these experiments are compatible with the universal principles of art, but also that—once again—"there is nothing new under the sun."

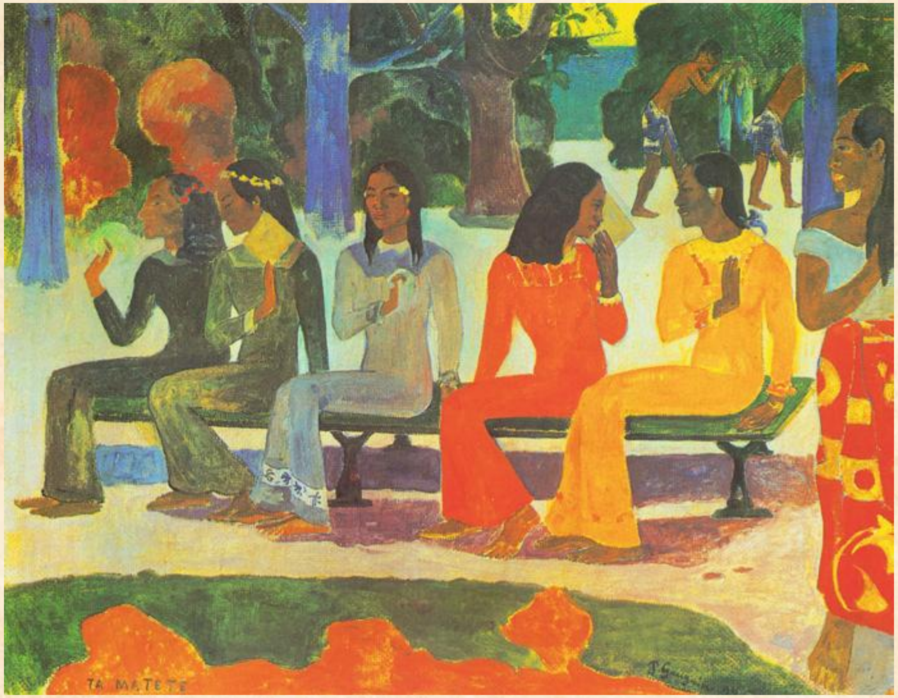


35. Nicholas Roerich, *Wanderer from the Resplendent City*, 1933
36. Ferdinand Hodler, *Jungfrau and Silverhorn as Seen from Mürren*, 1911

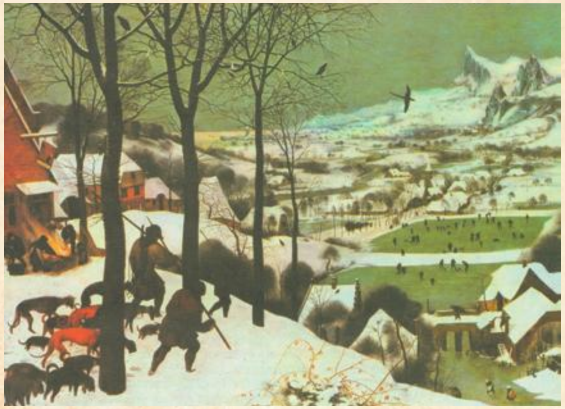
according to the diverse mentalities in space and time. But above all, it is necessary to relearn how to see and to look, and to understand that the sacred belongs to the field of the immutable and not to that of change.

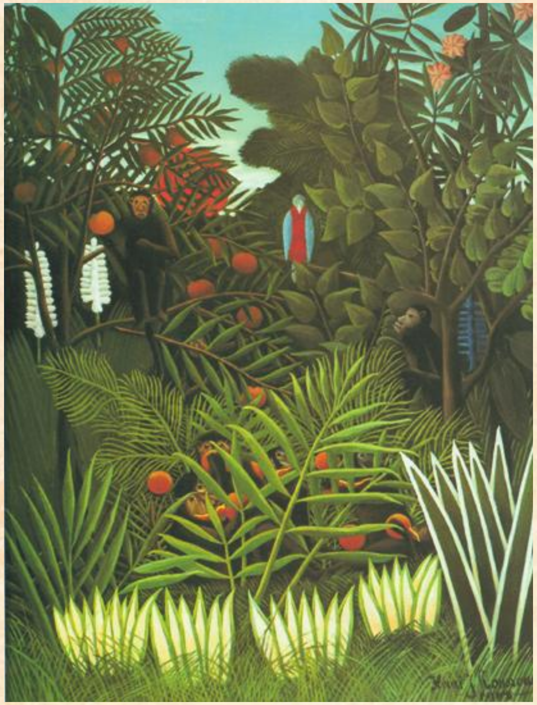
Insofar as profane art can be legitimate—and it can be, more than ever before, in this period of disfigurement and vulgarity—its mission is one of transmitting qualities of intelligence, beauty, and nobility; and this is something which cannot be realized apart from the rules which are imposed on us, not only by the very nature of the art in question, but also by the spiritual truth flowing from the divine prototype of every human creation.

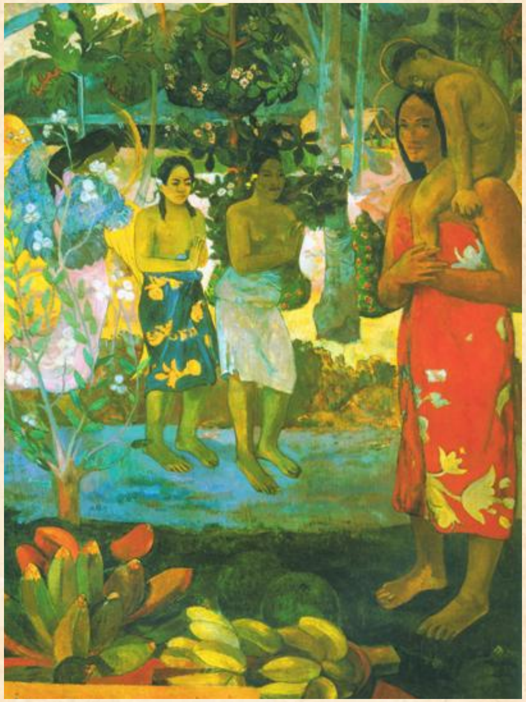




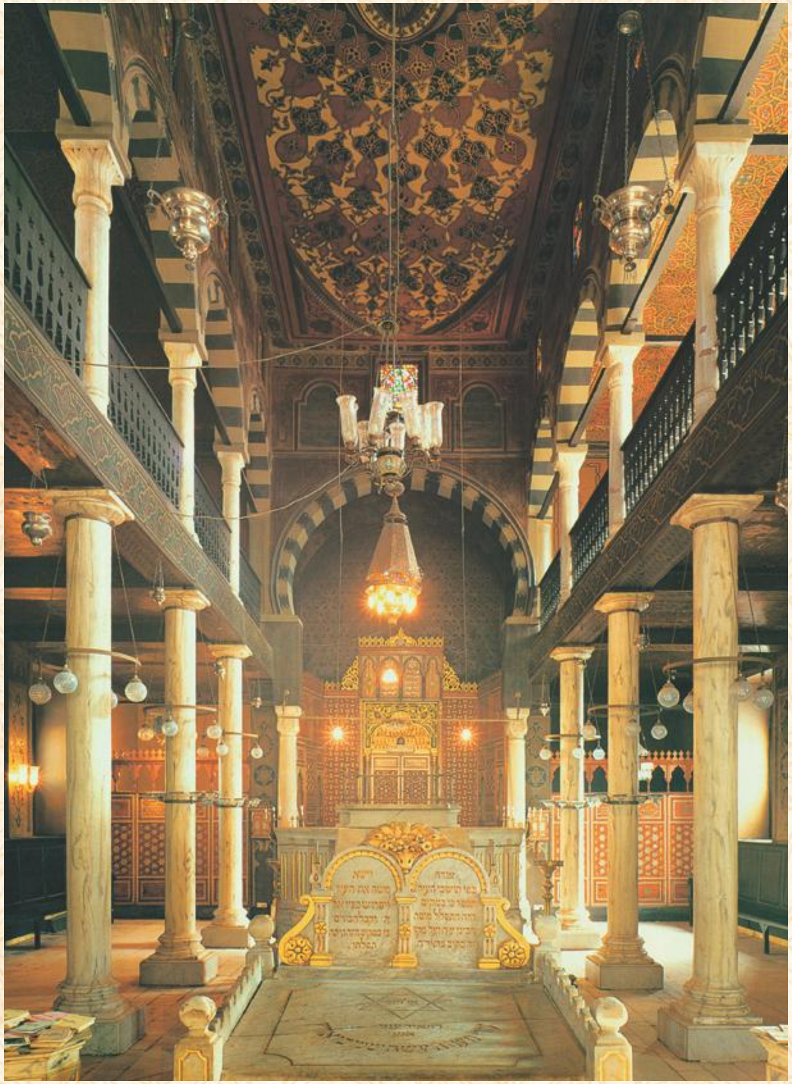
37. Miguel Covarrubias, *The Rice Granary*, 1931
38. Paul Gauguin, *The Market*, 1892







Top left: **39**. Brueghel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*, 1565; *Top center*: **40**. Harrison Begay, Navajo, *South Mountain*, 20th century; *Top right*: **41**. Antowine Warrior, Sac and Fox, *Coming Home*, late 20th century; *Bottom left*: **42**. Henri Rousseau, *Exotic Landscape*, 1908; *Bottom center*: **43**. Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life: Sunflowers*, 1888; *Bottom right*: **44**. Paul Gauguin, *Ia Orana, Maria* ("Salve, Maria"), 1891



45. Synagogue of Ben Ezra, Fostat, Old Cairo, Egypt
46. Vishnu, Mangalore, Karnataka, c. 14th century; Ornamental arch, Kerala, 14th-15th century

On Beauty and the Sense of the Sacred

Beauty is a crystallization of some aspect of universal joy; it is something limitless expressed by means of a limit.

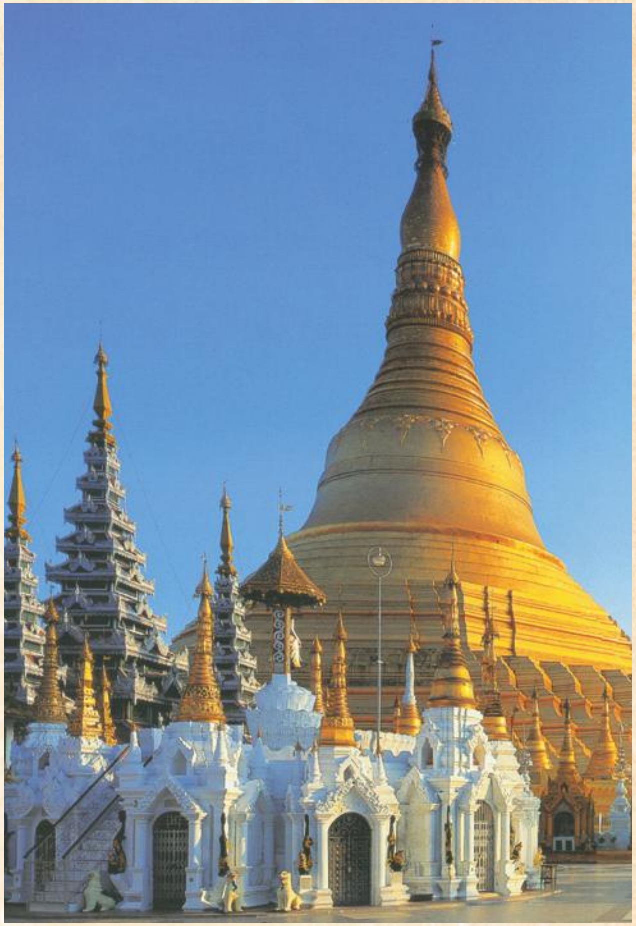
Beauty is a reflection of Divine bliss, and since God is Truth, the reflection of His bliss will be that mixture of happiness and truth which is to be found in all beauty.

Beauty is always beyond compare; no perfect beauty is more beautiful than another perfect beauty. One may prefer this beauty to that, but this is a matter of personal affinity or of complementary relationship and not of pure aesthetics. Human beauty, for instance, can be found in each of the major races, yet normally a man prefers some type of beauty in his own race rather than in another; inversely, qualitative and universal affinities between human types sometimes show themselves to be stronger than racial affinities.

Like every other kind of beauty artistic beauty is objective, and therefore discernible by intelligence, not by "taste." Taste is indeed legitimate, but only to the same extent as individual peculiarities are legitimate, that is, in so far as these peculiarities translate positive aspects of some human norm. Different tastes should be derived from pure aesthetics and should be of equal validity, just like the different ways in which the eye sees things.

Beauty, being perfection, is regularity and mystery; it is through these two qualities that it stimulates and at the same time appeases the intelligence and also a sensibility which is in conformity with the intelligence.

In sacred art, one finds everywhere and of necessity, regularity and mystery. According to a profane conception, that of classicism, it is regularity that produces beauty; but the beauty concerned is devoid of space and depth, because it is without mystery and consequently without any vibration of infinity.



47. The Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar, mid 18th century

48. Christ known as the "Handsome God," Cathedral of Amiens, France, 13th century

It can certainly happen in sacred art that mystery outweighs regularity, or vice versa, but the two elements are always present; it is their equilibrium which creates perfection.

The cosmic, or more particularly the earthly function of beauty is to actualize in the intelligent creature the Platonic recollection of the archetypes, right up to the luminous Night of the Infinite. This leads us to the conclusion that the full understanding of beauty demands virtue and is identifiable with it: that is to say, just as it is necessary to distinguish, in objective beauty, between the outward structure and the message in depth, so there is a *distinguo* to be made, in the sensing of the beautiful, between the aesthetic sensation and the corresponding beauty of soul, namely such and such a virtue. Beyond every question of "sensible consolation" the message of beauty is both intellectual and moral: intellectual because it communicates to us, in the world of accidentality, aspects of Substance, without for all that having to address itself to abstract thought; and moral, because it reminds us of what we must love, and consequently be.

Beauty is not only a matter of formal rectitude but also of content, as we have said, and the content of beauty is its richness of possibilities and its cosmic generosity, so that there is a beauty which possesses or envelops and a beauty which gives or overflows. Harmony of form is not merely the trueness of a square or a triangle, it is also and essentially the manifestation of an internal infinitude; it is such in so far as it is all that it is capable of being.

The archetype of beauty, or its Divine model, is the superabundance and equilibrium of the divine Qualities, and at the same time the overflowing of the existential potentialities contained in pure Being. In a rather different sense, beauty stems from the divine Love, this Love being the will to deploy itself and to give itself, to realize itself in "another"; thus it is that "God created the world by love."

All terrestrial beauty is thus by reflection a mystery of love. It is, "whether it likes it or not," coagulated love or music turned to crystal, but it retains on its face the imprint of its internal fluidity, of its beatitude, and of its liberality; it is measure in overflowing, in it is neither dissipation nor constriction. Human beings are rarely identified with their beauty, which is lent to them and moves across them like a ray of light. Only the *Avatāra* is *a priori* himself that ray; he "is" the beauty that he manifests corporeally, and that beauty is Beauty as such, the only Beauty there is.

Beauty has something pacifying and dilating in it, something consoling and liberating, because it communicates a substance of truth, of evidence, and of certitude, and it does so in a concrete and existential mode; thus it is like a mirror of our transpersonal and eternally blissful essence. It is essentially an objective factor which we may or may not see or may or may not understand but which like all objective reality, or like truth, possesses its own intrinsic quality; thus it exists before man and independently of him.

Every beauty is both a closed door and an open door, or in other words, an obstacle or a vehicle: either beauty separates us from God because it is entirely identified in our mind with its earthly support which then assumes the role of idol, or beauty brings us close to God because we perceive in it the vibrations of Beatitude and Infinity which emanate from divine Beauty.

The *de facto* ambiguity of beauty, and consequently of art, comes from the ambiguity of *Māyā*: just as the principle of manifestation and illusion both separates from the Creator and leads back to Him, so earthly beauties, including those of art, can favor worldliness as well as spirituality, which explains the diametrically opposed attitudes of the saints towards art in general or a given art in particular. The arts reputed to be the most dangerous are those engaging hearing or movement, namely poetry, music, and dance; they are like wine, which in Christianity serves as the vehicle for a deifying sacrament, while in

49. Jizo *Bosatsu*, Kamakura period, Japan, 13th century

Islam it is prohibited, each perspective being right despite the contradiction. That the intoxicating element—in the widest sense—particularly lends itself to sanctification, Islam recognizes in its esoterism, in which wine symbolizes ecstasy and in which poetry, music, and dance have become ritual means with a view to "remembrance."

Beauty, whatever use man may make of it, fundamentally belongs to its Creator, who through it projects into the world of appearances something of His being. Thus, one must live the experience of beauty so as to draw from it a lasting, not ephemeral, element, hence realizing in oneself an opening towards the immutable Beauty, rather than plunging oneself into the current of things; it is a question of viewing the world, and living in it, in a manner that is sacred and not profane; or sacralizing and not profanating.

The sense of the sacred is the innate consciousness of the presence of God: it is to feel this presence sacramentally in symbols and ontologically in all things.[1] Hence the sense of the sacred implies a kind of universal respect, a kind of circumspection before the mystery of animate and inanimate creatures.

The sacred is the projection of the celestial Center into the cosmic periphery, or of the "Motionless Mover" into the flux of things. To feel this concretely is to possess the sense of the sacred, and thereby the instinct of adoration, devotion, and submission; the sense of the sacred is the awareness—in the world of that which may or may not be—of That which cannot not be, and whose immense remoteness and miraculous proximity we experience at one and the same time.

The two poles of the sacred are truth and holiness: truth and holiness of persons and of things. A thing is true by its symbolism and holy by the depth

Opposite: **50**. *Egrets and Reeds*, Kano School, Japan, 18th century
Above: **51**. Ni Gusti Raka, Balinese dancer

[1] Ramakrishna, when he saw a flight of cranes, a lion, a dancing girl, used to fall into ecstasy. This is what is called "seeing God everywhere"; not by deciphering the symbolisms, of course, but by perceiving the essences.

52. Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, Papal Throne, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1657-1666

of its beauty; all beauty is a cosmic mode of holiness. In the spiritual order, man is in truth through his knowledge, and he is holy through his personal conformity to the truth and through the depth of this conformity.

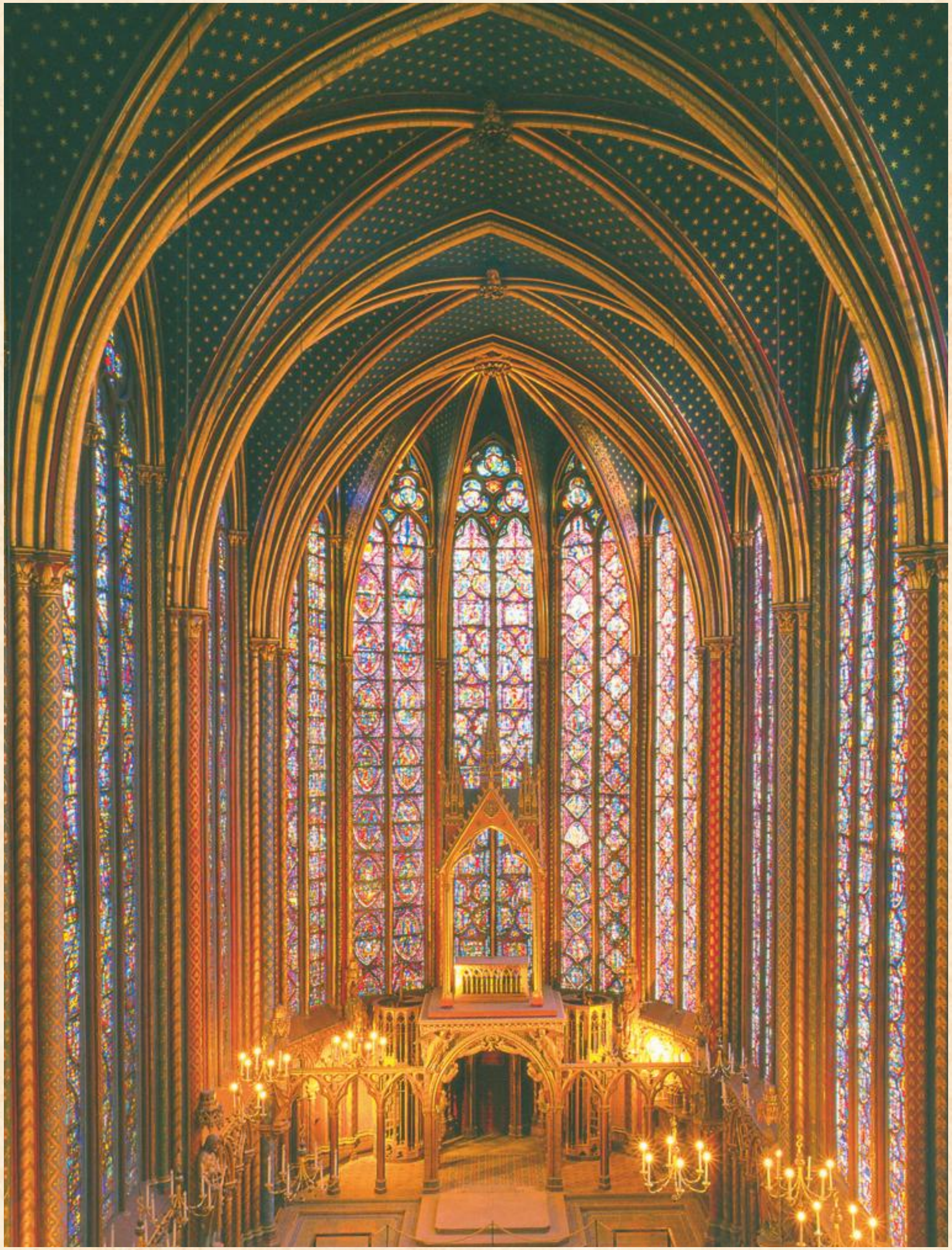
The combination of sanctity and beauty which characterizes the Messengers of Heaven is transmitted so to speak from the human theophanies to the sacred art which perpetuates it: the essentially intelligent and profound beauty of this art testifies to the truth which inspires it; it could not in any case be reduced to a human invention as regards the essential of its message. Sacred art is Heaven descended to earth, rather than earth reaching towards Heaven.[2]

[2] Within the framework of Christian art, the second image is nevertheless applicable to late Gothic art, in a relative manner and without abolishing the first. Let us point out at this opportunity that the spiritual criterion that is beauty cannot apply to the neo-pagan art that poisoned Europe in the sixteenth century and that expresses the fatal marriage between religion and humanist civilizationism. No doubt, neither the cold and anthropolatrous gigantism of the Renaissance nor the morbid inflatedness of the Baroque [see ill. 52] prove anything against Catholicism in itself, but what they certainly prove is on the one hand that a religion which supports this language and expresses itself through it cannot have the monopoly of the absolute and exclusive Truth, and on the other hand that Catholicism, by this amalgam, exposed itself finally to being its victim; not in a total manner, which is excluded in advance, but nevertheless in an extremely serious manner. The humanization of the art—*a priori* divine—prefigured that of the religion, at least of the official religion.

The multiform beauty of a sanctuary is like the crystallization of a spiritual flux or of a stream of blessings. It is as though invisible and celestial power had fallen into matter—which hardens, divides, and scatters—and had transformed it into a shower of precious forms, into a sort of planetary system of symbols, surrounding us and penetrating us from every side. The impact, if one may so call it, is analogous to that of the benediction itself; it is direct and existential; it goes beyond thought and seizes our being in its very substance.

There are blessings which are like snow; and others which are like wine; all can be crystallized in sacred art. What is exteriorized in such art is both doctrine and blessing, geometry and the music of Heaven.

The Sainte Chapelle: a shimmer of rubies and sapphires set in gold. No individual genius could improvise its splendors. One might think that they had sprung from the lily and the gentian.

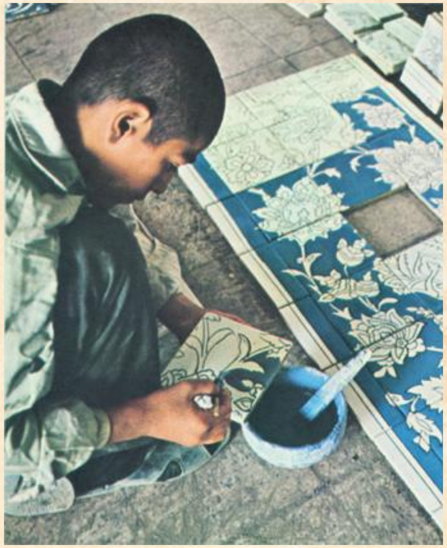


53. Sainte Chapelle, Paris, 13th century

Man and Art

The vocation *sine qua non* of man is to be spiritual. Spirituality manifests itself on the planes which constitute man, namely intelligence, will, affectivity, production: human intelligence is capable of transcendence, of the absolute, of objectivity; the human will is capable of liberty, and thus of conformity to what is grasped by the intelligence; human feeling (affectivity), which is joined to each of the preceding faculties, is capable of compassion and generosity, by reason of the objectivity of the human mind, which takes the soul out of its animal egoism. Finally, there is the specifically human capacity for production, and it is because of this that man has been called *homo faber*, and not *homo sapiens* only: it is the capacity for producing tools and constructing dwellings and sanctuaries, and if need be for making clothes and creating works of art, and also for spontaneously combining in these creations symbolism and harmony. The language of harmony may be simple or rich, depending on needs, perspectives, and temperaments; decoration too has its purpose, both from the point of view of symbolism, and from that of musicality. This amounts to saying that this fourth capacity must also have a spiritual content on pain of not being human; its role moreover is simply to exteriorize the three preceding capacities by adapting them to material needs or the needs of worship, or let us simply say by projecting them into the sensible order otherwise than by rational discourse or writing. Exiled on earth as we are, unless we are able to content ourselves with that shadow of Paradise that is virgin nature, we must create for ourselves surroundings which by their truth and their beauty recall our heavenly origin and thereby also awaken our hope.

What the people need in order to find meaning in life, hence the possibility of earthly happiness, is religion and the crafts: religion because every man has need of it, and the crafts because they allow man to manifest his personality and to realize his vocation in the framework of a sapiential symbolism;



Opposite: **54**. Miniature from Girard de Rousillon, France, 1448
Above: **55**. Earthenware painter, Isfahan; **56**. Coppersmith working on a tray and a candleholder, Isfahan

57. Weaver in Bali; **58**. Navajo sandpainting; **59**. Stitching Lahu Na appliqué

every man loves intelligible work and work well done. Now, industrialism has robbed the people of both things: on the one hand of religion, denied by scientism from which industry derives, and rendered implausible by the inhuman character of the ambience of machinery; and on the other hand of the crafts, replaced precisely by machines; so much so, that in spite of all the "social doctrines" of the Church and the nationalistic bourgeoisie, there is nothing left for the people which can give meaning to their life and make them happy.

The elements of beauty, be they visual or auditive, static or dynamic, are not only pleasant, they are above all true and their pleasantness comes from their truth: this is the most obvious, and yet the least understood truth of aesthetics. Furthermore, as Plotinus remarked, every element of beauty or harmony is a mirror or receptacle which attracts the spiritual presence to its form or color, if one may so express it; if this applies as directly as possible to sacred symbols, it also applies, in a less direct and more diffuse way, in the case of all things that are harmonious and therefore true. Thus, an artisanal ambience made of sober beauty—for there is no question of sumptuousness except in very special cases—attracts or favors *barakah*, "blessing"; not that it creates spirituality any more than pure air creates health, but it is at all events in conformity with it, which is much, and which, humanly, is the normal thing.

In spite of these facts, which would seem to be quite obvious and which are corroborated by all the beauties that Heaven has bestowed on the traditional worlds, some will doubtless ask what connection there can be between the aesthetic value of a house, of an interior decoration, or of a tool and spiritual realization: did Shankara ever concern himself with aesthetics or morality? The answer to this is that the soul of a sage of this caliber is naturally beautiful and exempt from every pettiness, and that furthermore, an integrally traditional environment—especially in a milieu like that of the *brahmins*—largely if not absolutely excludes artistic or artisanal ugliness; so much so that Shankara had nothing to teach—nor *a fortiori* to learn—on the subject of aesthetic

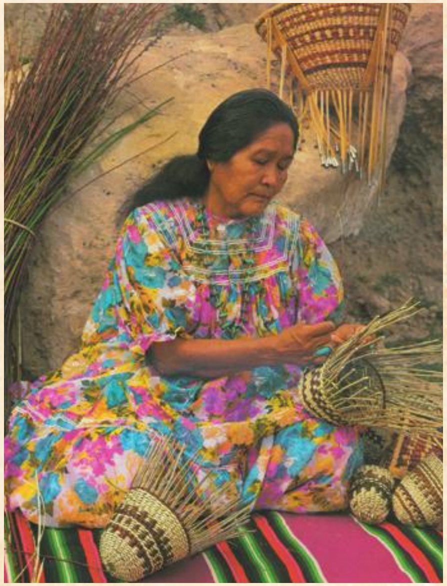
values, unless he had been an artist by vocation and profession, which he was not, and which his mission was far from demanding.

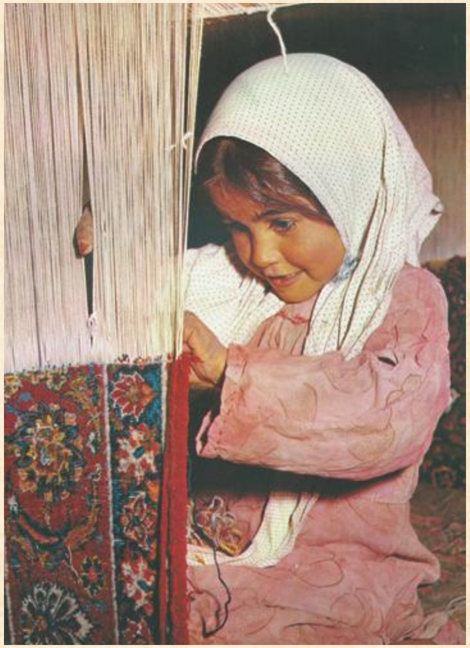
To be sure, the sensation of the beautiful may in fact be only a pleasant experience, depending on the degree of receptiveness; but according to its nature and of course by virtue of its object, it offers to the intellect, in parallel with its musicality, an intellectual satisfaction, and thus an element of knowledge.

Art in the broadest sense is the crystallization of archetypal values, and not a literal copy of the phenomena of nature or of the soul; and that is why the terms "reality" and "realism" have another meaning in art than in the sciences; the latter record phenomena without disdaining accidental and insignificant contingencies, whereas art, on the contrary, operates by abstraction in order to extract gold from "raw material." Positive originality cannot arise from our desires; it proceeds from a combination of our traditional environment and our legitimate personality, a combination pregnant with archetypes susceptible of manifesting themselves in it, and disposed to doing so. In a word, art is the quest for—and the revelation of—the center, within us as well as around us.

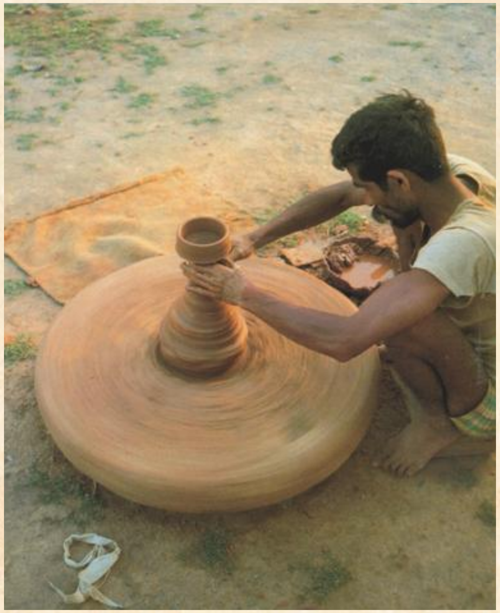
Certainly the artist does not fashion his work with the sole intention of producing a spiritually or psychologically useful object; he also produces it for the joy of creating by imitating, and of imitating by creating, that is to say, for the joy of elucidating the existential intention of the model, or in other words, of extracting from the latter its very quintessence; at least this is so in some cases, which it would be pretentious and out of proportion to generalize. In other cases, on the contrary, the work of the artist is an extinction through love, the artist dying, so to speak, in creating: he performs an act of union by identifying himself with the admired or beloved object, by recreating it according to the music of his own soul.

At all events, the "sensible consolation" is in the work before being in the result; the sanctification of the religious artist precedes that of the spectator.





60. Apache basket weaver; **61**. Carpet weaver, Iran

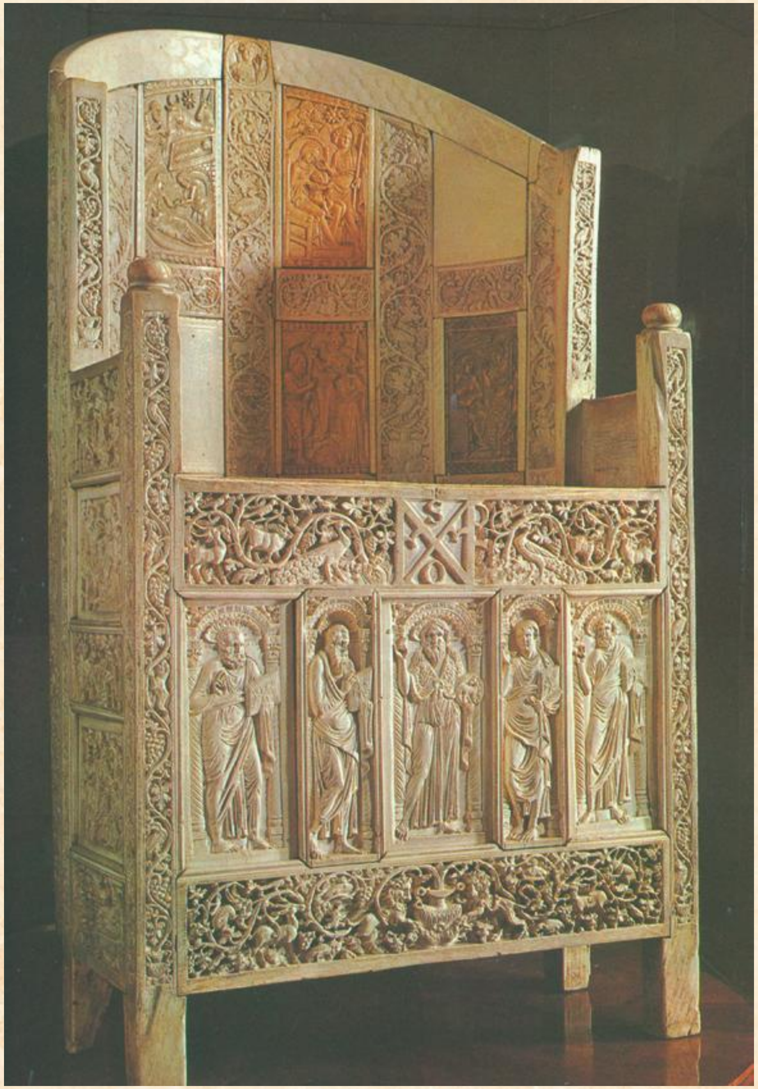


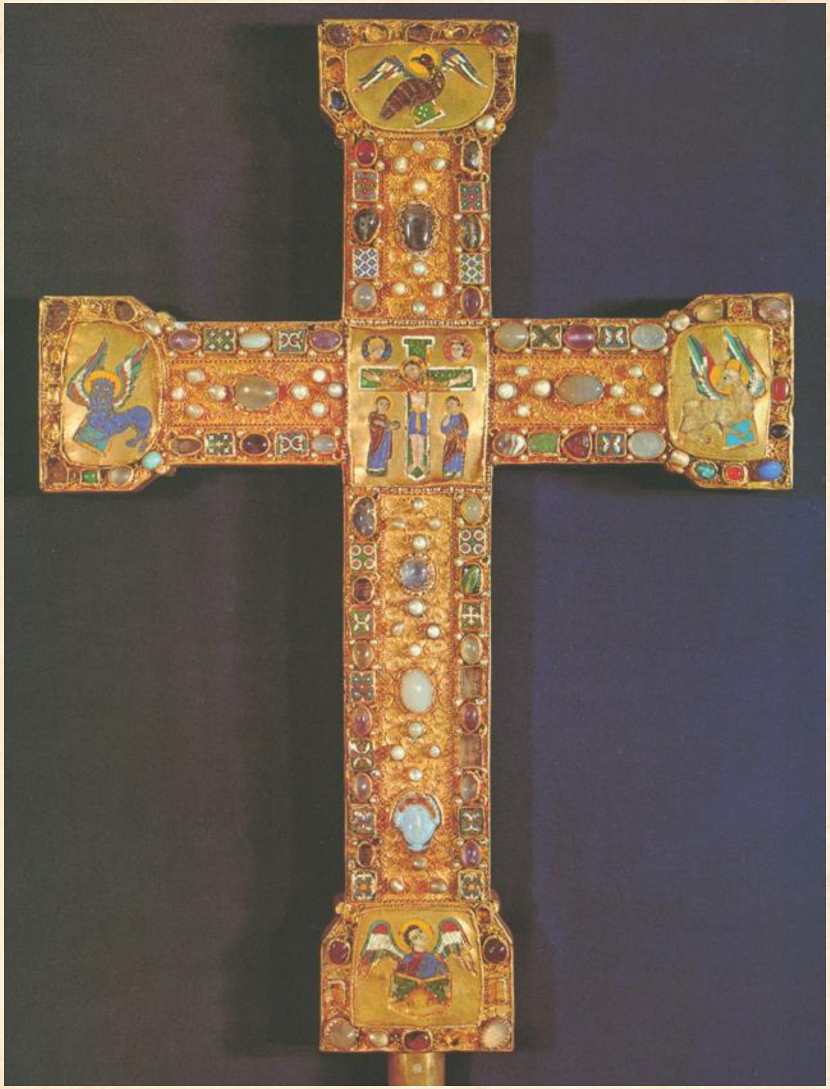
Every legitimate art satisfies both emotivity and intelligence, not only in the finished work, but also in its production.

There is likewise in art a desire to pin down the visual, auditive, or other forms which escape us, and which we wish to retain or possess; to this desire for fixation or possession there is added quite naturally a desire for assimilation, for a quality must not only be beautiful, it must also be entirely ours, which brings us back directly or indirectly, depending on the case, to the theme of union and love.

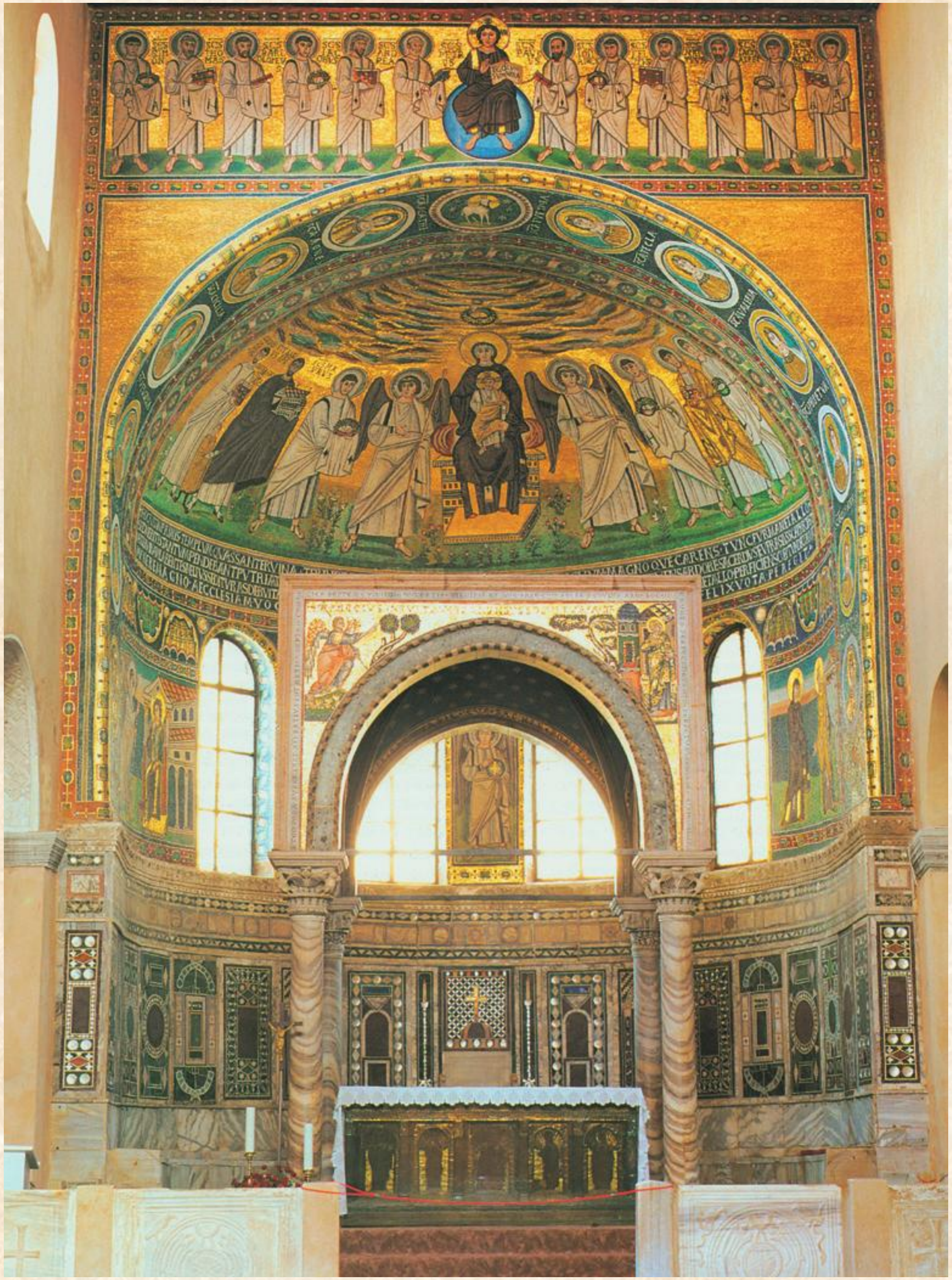
For God, His creature reflects an exteriorized aspect of Himself; for the artist, on the contrary, the work is a reflection of an inner reality of which he himself is only an outward aspect; God creates His own image, while man so to speak fashions his own essence, at least symbolically. On the principial plane, the inner manifests itself in the outer, but on the manifested plane, the outer fashions the inner, and a sufficient reason for all traditional art, no matter of what kind, is the fact that in a certain sense the work is greater than the artist himself, and brings back the latter, through the mystery of artistic creation, to the proximity of his own Divine Essence.[1]

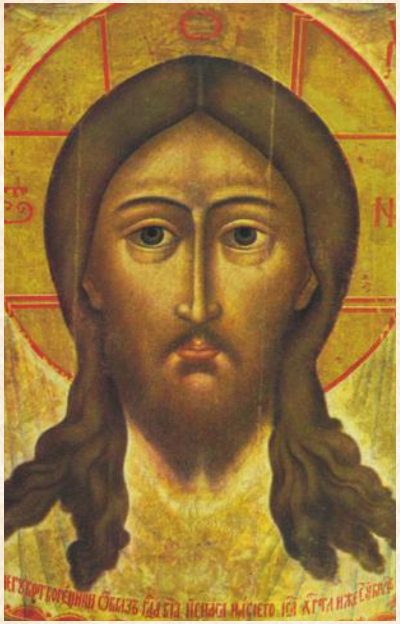
[1] This explains the danger, so far as Semitic peoples are concerned, that lies in the painting and especially in the carving of living things. Where the Hindu and the inhabitant of the Far East adores a Divine reality through a symbol—and we know that a symbol is truly what it symbolizes as far as its essential reality is concerned—the Semite will display a tendency to deify the symbol itself; one of the reasons for the prohibition of plastic and pictorial arts amongst the Semitic peoples was certainly a wish to prevent naturalistic deviations.





Opposite: **62**. A potter from a village in Uttar Pradesh, India; **63**. A painter of fabrics in Bali; *Above*: **64.** Throne of Maximian, archbishop of Ravenna, Byzantine, ivory over wood, c. 546-556; **65**. Enamel Cross of Abbess Mathilde, gold with enamel, filigree, and precious stones, Essen Cathedral Treasury, c. 985





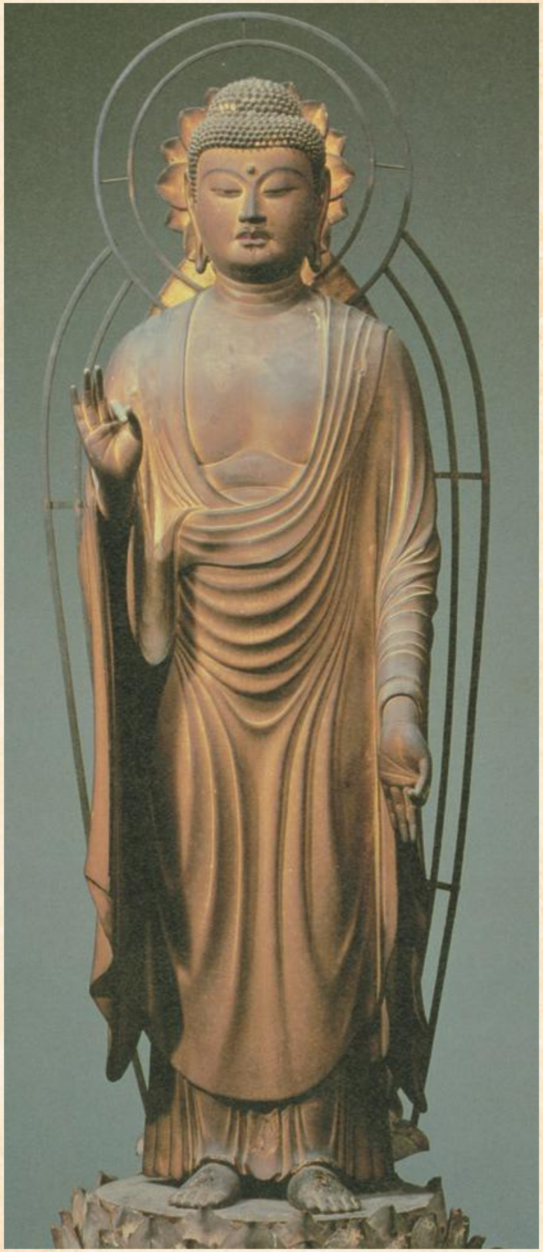
66. Sanctuary apse, Basilica Euphrasiana, Parenzo, Italy, 6th century; **67**. The Virgin of Vladimir, c. 1125; **68**. Icon of Christ "Not Made by Hands"

Sacred Art

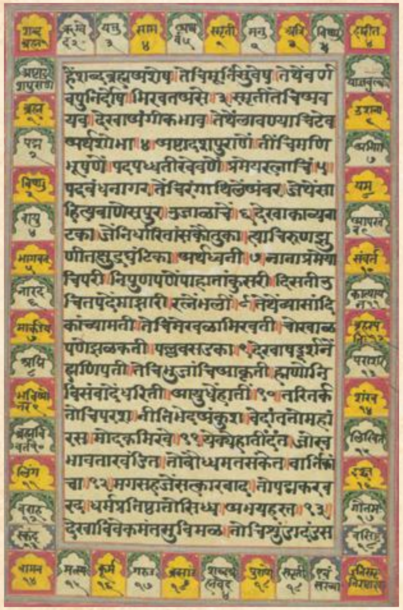
Traditions emerge from the Infinite like flowers; they can no more be fabricated than the sacred art which is their witness and their proof.

No art in itself is a human creation; but sacred art has this particularity, that its essential content is a revelation, that it manifests a properly sacramental form of heavenly reality, such as the icon of the Virgin and Child, painted by an angel, or by Saint Luke inspired by an angel, and such as the icon of the Holy Face which goes back to the Holy Shroud and to Saint Veronica; or such as the statue of Shiva dancing or the painted or carved images of the Buddhas, *Bodhisattva*s, and *Tārā*s. To the same category—in the widest acceptation of the term—belong ritual psalmody in a sacred language—among others Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Arabic—and, in certain cases, the calligraphic copying—likewise ritual—of the sacred Books; architecture, or at least the decoration of sanctuaries, liturgical objects, and sacerdotal vestments are in general of a less direct order. It would be difficult to do justice in a few lines to all possible types of sacred expression, which comprises such diverse modes as recitation, writing, architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, the art of gestures, clothing.

Sacred art is first of all the visible and audible form of Revelation and then also its indispensable liturgical vesture. The form must be an adequate expression of its content; in no case should it contradict it, it cannot be abandoned to the arbitrary decisions of individuals, to their ignorance and their passions. But we must distinguish different degrees in sacred art, thus different levels of absoluteness or of relativity, and in addition we must take account of the relative character of form as such. The spiritual integrity of the form is a "categorical imperative" but this cannot prevent the formal order from being subject to certain vicissitudes; the fact that the masterpieces of sacred art are sublime expressions of the Spirit must not make us forget that, seen from the



69. Amida Buddha, Kamakura period, Japan, 1202-1208



standpoint of this same Spirit, these works already appear, in their more ponderous exteriorizations, as concessions to the world. Indeed, when the Spirit has need of such a degree of exteriorization, it is already well on the way to being lost; exteriorization as such bears within itself the poison of outwardness, and so of exhaustion, fragility, and decrepitude; the masterpiece is as it were laden with regrets and is already a swan song; one sometimes has the impression that art—through the very surplus of its perfections—is there to make up for the absence of wisdom or of sanctity. The Desert Fathers had no need of colonnades and stained glass windows; but, on the other hand, those who today despise sacred art in the name of "pure spirit" are the very people who least understand it and have most need of it. Be this as it may, nothing noble can ever be lost: all the treasures of art and those of nature too are found again, in perfection and infinitely, in the divine Beatitude; a man who is fully conscious of this truth cannot fail to be detached from sensory crystallizations as such.

Objectively, the true function of sacred images is to represent symbolically and sacramentally a transcendent Reality, and subjectively, to permit the fixing of the mind upon this symbol in view of obtaining habitual concentration upon the Reality contemplated, something which can be conceived in devotional as well as in intellectual mode, or in both manners at once.

It is to be remembered that according to the Eastern Church the icon is not properly speaking a human work, but rather a manifestation of the heavenly Model itself. The icon has been compared to a window from earth to Heaven and from Heaven to earth; the gold background of the paintings reflects the celestial aura, the luminous substance that envelops deified beings and thus in certain respects rejoins the symbolism of the "light of Tabor."

The first aim of sacred art is didactic, whether it be a pictorial catechism for the use of the unlettered or, on the contrary, a metaphysical or mystical

Opposite: *Top left*: **70**. Page from the *Jñāneshvari*, a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Nagpur, India, 18th century; *Top center*: **71**. *Karamukha Cakrasamvara mandala*, Tibet, 18th century; *Top right*: **72**. Page from the *Hannya shinkyō Sūtra*, Nara, Japan, late Heian period; *Bottom left*: **73**. Page from the Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, c.1400; *Bottom center*: **74**. *Garbhadhātu mandala* of To-ji temple, Kyoto, Japan, 9th century; *Bottom right*: **75**. Koran page in Eastern Kufic script, Iraq or Persia, 11th century
Above: **76**. Our Lady of Petrovskaya, Russia, early 16th century

77. Romanesque Madonna, Lombardy, Italy, 13th century

doctrine suggested by symbols, which does not mean that the two things are separate. Sacerdotal art sets out to express a symbolism that is either simple or complex, and in so doing it transmits at the same time, and inevitably since its language is one of form, an influence of beauty, hence of joyous "expansion"; if it sought visible harmony for its own sake, it would fall into arbitrariness and into that individualistic and sterile impasse which is naturalism. The error of naturalism is not that it is blind to aesthetic qualities, certainly, but, in the first place, that it lacks sufficient reason insofar as it takes itself for an end in itself, or what amounts to the same thing, insofar as it attributes glory to the artist or to the sensible model alone; and secondly, that it violates the rules resulting from tradition on the one hand, and from the nature of things on the other.

On the plane of spiritual values no two things are more divergent than wisdom, which is inward, and art, which is outward; between them is all the distance separating essence and form. Yet "extremes meet," and nothing is closer to wisdom and sanctity than sacred art, or the liturgy, in the widest sense of these terms, which explains the value, in no way disproportionate, that traditional civilizations attach to these disciplines. The image of the Divine, including sacred calligraphy as well as anthropomorphic representations,[1] is like the visible face of the Truth: in a language both direct and graduated, it renders transparent that which spirituality hides in the depths of hearts.

Side by side with their intrinsic qualities, the forms of art answer a strictly useful purpose. In order that spiritual influences may be able to manifest themselves without encumbrance, they have need of a formal setting which corresponds to them analogically and without which they cannot radiate, even if they remain always present. It is true that in the soul of a holy man they

[1] Not forgetting categories of art such as the Buddhist *mandala*, where geometry combines with calligraphy and, if need be, with human figures.

can shine in spite of everything, but not everyone is a saint, and a sanctuary is constructed to facilitate resonances of the spirit, not to oppose them.[2]

Sacred art is made as a vehicle for spiritual presences, it is made at one and the same time for God, for angels, and for man; profane art on the other hand exists only for man and by that very fact betrays him.

Sacred art helps man to find his own center, that kernel whose nature is to love God.

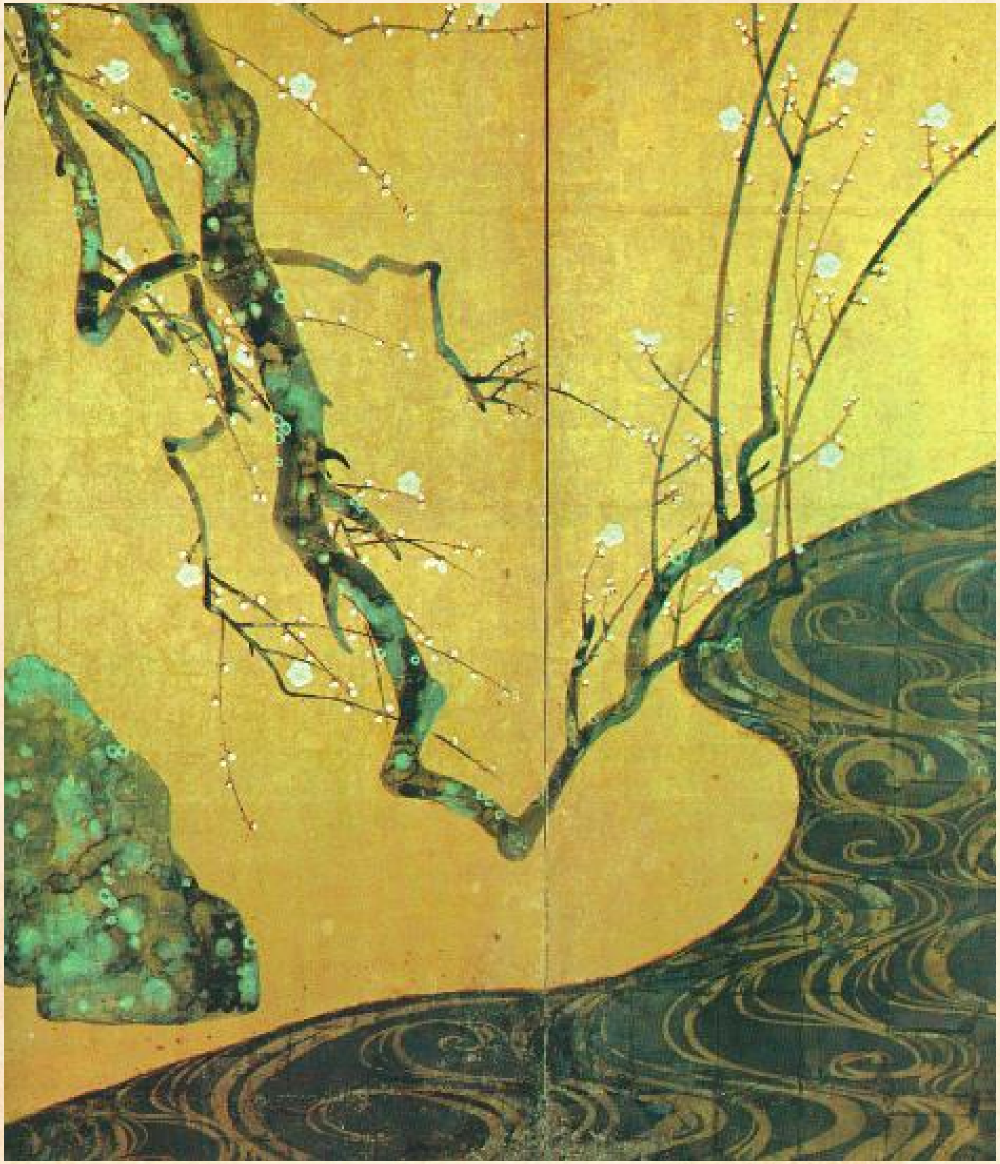
Sacred art, of which a particular saint personally has no need, nonetheless exteriorizes his sanctity, or precisely that something which can make artistic exteriorization superfluous for that saint himself. Through art, this sanctity or wisdom has become miraculously tangible with all its human *materia* which virgin nature could not provide; in a sense, the dilating and refreshing virtue of nature is that of being not human but angelic. To say that one prefers the works of God to the works of man would be to simplify the problem unduly, given that in any art meriting the epithet "sacred" it is God who is the author; man is merely the instrument and what is human is merely the material.

If sacred art appeals to contemplative intelligence, it likewise appeals to normal human sensibility. This means that such art alone possesses a universal language, and that none is better fitted to appeal, not only to an elite, but also to the people at large. Let us remember, too, as far as the apparently childlike aspect of the traditional mentality is concerned, Christ's injunction to be "as little children" and "simple as doves," words that, no matter what may be their spiritual meaning, also quite plainly refer to psychological realities.

The Fathers of the eighth century, very different from those religious authorities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who betrayed Christian art

78. Scenes illustrating verses from the *Bible Moralisée*, known as the Bible of Saint Louis, France, 1226

[2] It will be said that angels are at ease in a stable. But a stable, precisely, is not a baroque or surrealist church.



by abandoning it to the impure passions of worldly men and the ignorant imagination of the profane, were fully conscious of the holiness of all the means of expression belonging to their religion. They stipulated, at the second council of Nicaea, that "art (the integral perfection of work) alone belongs to the painter, while ordinance (the choice of the subject) and disposition (the treatment of the subject from the symbolical as well as the technical or material points of view) belongs to the Fathers."

It is important to understand, first of all, that the purpose of art is not *a priori* to induce aesthetic emotions, but to transmit, together with these, a more or less direct spiritual message, and thus suggestions emanating from, and leading back to, the liberating truth. Certainly art belongs by very definition to the formal order, and who says perfection of form, says beauty; to claim that art has nothing to do with beauty, on the pretext that its immediate end is spiritual, is as false as to affirm the contrary: that beauty is the exclusive end of the work of art. Beauty essentially implies a container and a content: as to the container, it is represented by conformity to the laws of harmony, or regularity of structure, whereas the content is a manifestation of "Being" or of "Knowledge" or again of "Beatitude" or more precisely a varied combination of the three elements; it is, moreover, these contents that determine *a priori* the container. To speak of beauty "pure and simple" with pejorative intent is

a contradiction in terms since beauty cannot but manifest truth or an aspect or mode of it; if sensible harmony "delivers" after its own manner and under certain conditions, it is because it is truth.

Profane art, if it is not sacred art, is nonetheless not to be identified with anti-traditional art: it may perfectly well, on the one hand, respect at least the negative rules of universal art, and, on the other hand, assume a function analogous to sacerdotal art, even while being no doubt much less central than the latter; between sacerdotal and profane art there are, moreover, intermediate modes. It should be added that in the case of the artist an initial subjective preoccupation with a particular aesthetic value—if the need arises—is in no wise opposed to the profound function of art nor consequently to the spiritual perfection of the work, for, all things being interrelated, it goes without saying that aesthetic emotion may convey, as it did for Ramakrishna, a spiritual intuition or even a truth which the artist may not necessarily be conscious of, but which will be transmitted none the less.[3]

If traditional art cannot be always and everywhere at a peak of attainment, this is not because of any principial insufficiency, but because of man's intellectual and moral insufficiencies which cannot fail to become exteriorized in art as in his other activities.

If we start from the idea that perfect art can be recognized by three main criteria: nobility of content—this being a spiritual condition apart from which art has no right to exist—then exactness of symbolism or at least, in the case

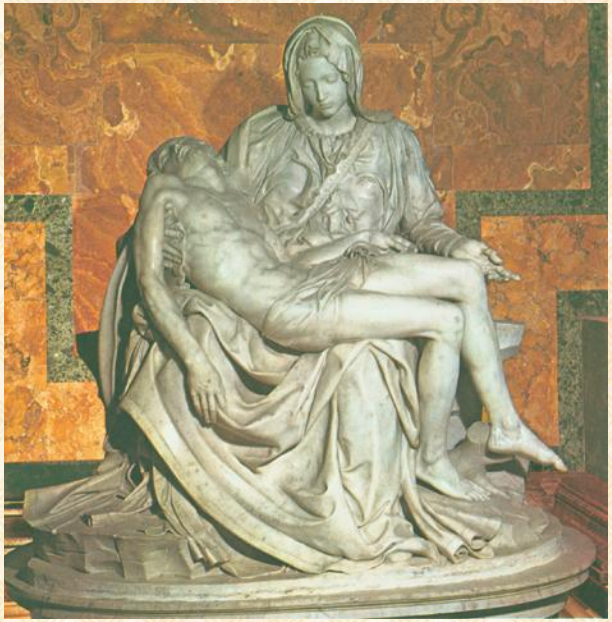
Opposite: **79**. Ogata Korin, *White Prunus in the Spring*, Edo period, Japan, late 17th-early 18th century
Above: **80**. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, 1488

[3] When one compares the blustering and heavily carnal paintings of a Rubens with noble, correct, and profound works such as the profile of Giovanna Tornabuoni by Ghirlandaio or the screens with plum-trees by Korin, one may wonder whether the term "profane art" can serve as a common denominator for productions that are so fundamentally different. In the case of noble works impregnated with contemplative spirit one would prefer to speak of "extra-liturgical art," without having to specify whether it is profane or not, or to what extent it is. Moreover one must distinguish between normal profane art and a profane art which is deviated and which has thereby ceased to be a term of comparison.

of profane works of art, harmony of composition, and finally purity of style or elegance of line and color, we can discern with the help of these criteria the qualities and defects of any work of art whether sacred or not. It goes without saying that some modern work may, as if by chance, possess these qualities; nonetheless it would be a mistake to see in this any justification of an art that is deprived of all positive principles; the exceptional qualities of such a work are in any case far from being characteristic of the art in question when viewed as a whole, but appear only incidentally under cover of the eclecticism which goes with anarchy. The existence of such works proves, however, that a legitimate profane art is conceivable in the West without any need to return purely and simply to the miniatures of the Middle Ages or to peasant painting, for a healthy state of soul and a normal treatment of materials always guarantee the rectitude of an art devoid of pretensions. It is the nature of things—on the spiritual and on the psychological as well as on the material and technical level—which demands that each of the constituent elements of art should fulfill certain elementary conditions, these being precisely the ones by which all traditional art is governed.

First there is sacred art in the strictest sense, as it appears in the Tabernacle of Moses, where God Himself prescribed both the form and the materials; then there is the sacred art which has been developed in conformity with a particular ethnic genius; and finally there are decorative aspects of sacred art in which the ethnic genius is more freely expressed, though always in conformity with a spirit that transcends it. Genius is nothing unless determined by a spiritual perspective.

Opposite: **81.** Frithjof Schuon, *Council of Chiefs*, 1959
82. Frithjof Schuon, *The Descent of the White Buffalo-cow Woman*, 1959
Above: **83**. Frithjof Schuon, *Virgin and Child*, 1968



84. Raphael, *The Transfiguration*, 1517-1520; **85**. Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1563; **86**. *Venus*, c. 150-100 B.C.; **87**. Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, 1474

Naturalistic Art

Non-traditional art, about which a few words must be said here, embraces the classical art of antiquity and the Renaissance, and continues up to the nineteenth century which, reacting against academicism, gives rise to impressionism and analogous styles; this reaction rapidly decomposes into all sorts of perversities, either "abstract" or "surrealistic": in any case, it is of "subrealism" that one ought to speak here. It goes without saying that worthwhile works are to be found incidentally both in impressionism and in classicism—in which we include romanticism, since its technical principles are the same—, for the cosmic qualities cannot but manifest themselves in this realm, and a given individual aptitude cannot but lend itself to this manifestation;[1] but these exceptions, in which the positive elements succeed in neutralizing the erroneous or insufficient principles, are far from being able to compensate for the serious drawbacks of extra-traditional art, and we would gladly do without all its productions if it were possible to disencumber the world from the heavy mortgage of Western culturism, with its vices of impiety, dispersion, and poisonousness. The least that one can say is that it is not this kind of grandeur that brings us closer to Heaven.

This culturism is practically synonymous with civilizationism, and thus with implicit racism; according to this prejudice, Western humanity proves its superiority by the "Greek miracle" and all its consequences, and thus by

[1] Apart from his sonnets the human greatness of Michelangelo appears chiefly in his sculpture, in works like the *Moses* and the *Pietà*, and that apart from any question of principles or style. In his painting and architecture this greatness is as if crushed by the errors of the period; it gets lost in heaviness and pathos or in the cold gigantism that also characterizes the statues and which is a dominant mark of the Renaissance. With the impressionists the academic spirit fell into discredit; one would gladly believe that this was due to a slightly deeper understanding, but such is not the case, for an unforeseeable change of fashion was enough to call everything once again into question; moreover the academical spirit has already been revived within surrealism, though always in the climate of the oppressive ugliness characteristic of that school.

88. Michelangelo, *Moses*, 1513-1516

89. Ramses II on the throne, 19th dynasty, Karnak, Egypt, 1270 B.C.

the anthropolatry—it is not for nothing that one speaks of humanism—and cosmolatry which characterize or rather constitute the classicist mentality.

As we have mentioned on other occasions, what must be blamed in artistic naturalism is not its exact observation of nature, but the fact that this observation is not compensated and disciplined by an equivalent awareness of that which transcends nature, and so of the essences of things, as happens for example in Egyptian art; in all sacred arts it is the style which indicates a mode of inwardness and corrects such outwardness, contingency, and accidentality as the imitation of nature may involve; we would even say that an awareness of essences to a certain extent compromises or retards, if not a sufficient observation of outward things, at least their exact expression in graphic terms, although—and one must insist on this—there is no incompatibility in principle between exact draughtsmanship and contemplativity, the latter conferring on the former the imprint of inwardness and essentiality.

In conformity with the Platonic principle that like attracts like, Plotinus states that "it is always easy to attract the Universal Soul … by constructing an object capable of undergoing its influence and receiving its participation. The faithful representation of a thing is always capable of undergoing the influence of its model; it is like a mirror which is capable of grasping the thing's appearance."

This passage states the crucial principle of almost magical relationship between the conforming recipient and the predestined content or between the adequate symbol and the sacramental presence of the prototype. The ideas of Plotinus must be understood in the light of those of the "divine Plato": the latter approved the fixed types of the sacred sculpture of Egypt, but he rejected the works of the Greek artists who imitated nature in its outward and insignificant accidentality, while following their individual imagination.

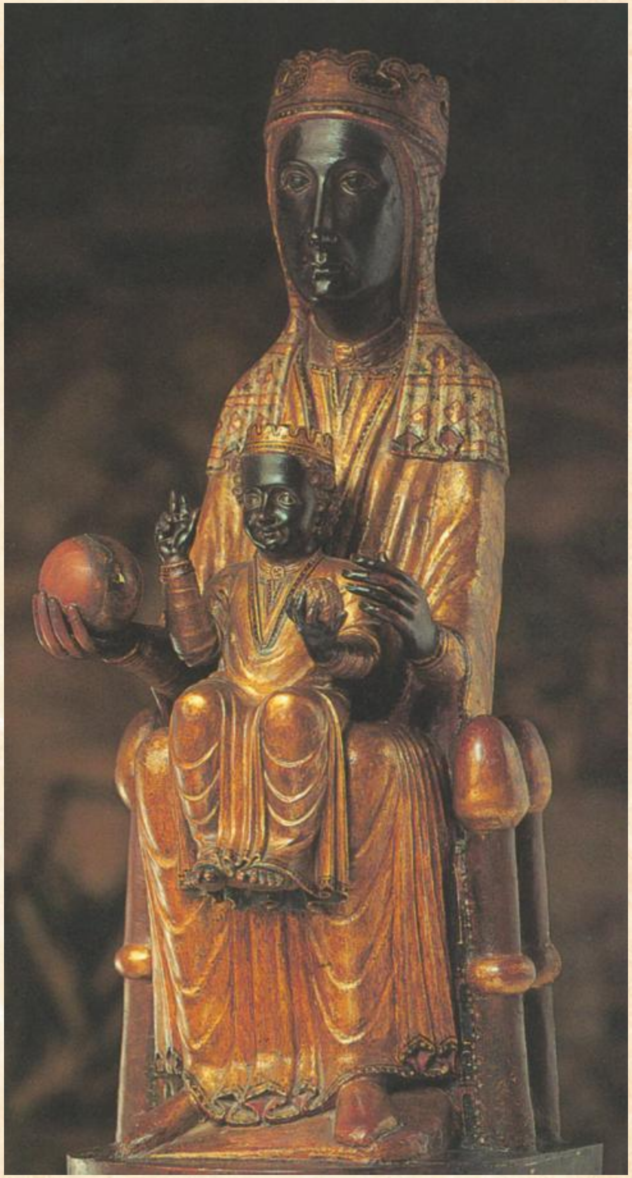
This principle does not prevent a heavenly influence manifesting itself incidentally or accidentally even in an image which is extremely imperfect—works of perversion and subversion being excluded—through pure mercy and by virtue of the "exception that proves the rule."

A perfect equilibrium between a noble naturalness and an interiorizing and essentializing is a precarious, but always possible phenomenon. It goes without saying that essentiality or the "idea" takes precedence over observation and the imitation of nature. To each thing its rights, according to its place.

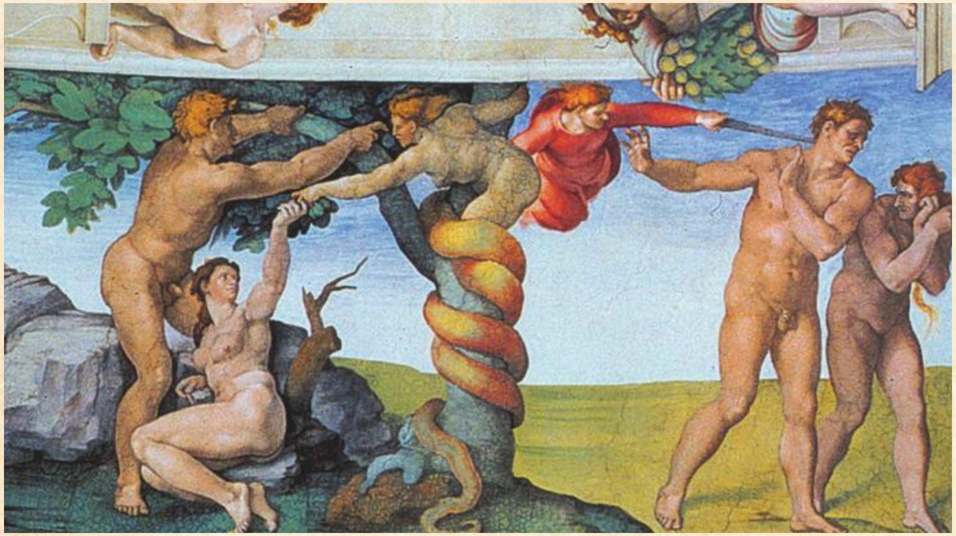
Stylization permits a maximum of naturalism where it is able to impose on it a maximum of essentiality; in other words, a summit of creative exteriorization calls for a summit of interiorizing power and consequently demands a mastery of the means whereby this power may be realized. In the majority of cases art stops half-way and there is nothing wrong in this, since concretely there is no reason why it should go further; traditional art perfectly fulfills its role; art is not everything, and its productions do not have to be absolute. But this is independent of the principle that sacred art must satisfy every sincere believer; it fails in its mission if its crudeness, or on the contrary its superficial virtuosity, leaves unsatisfied or even troubles believers of good will, namely those whom humility preserves from all intolerance and worldly acrimony.

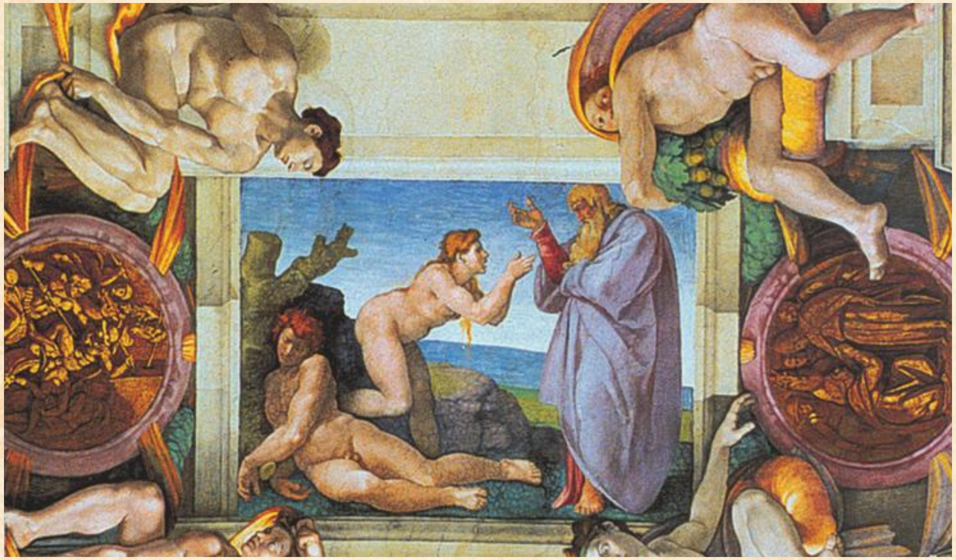
We have already remarked that there is a relative but not irremediable incompatibility—an incompatibility of fact and not of principle—between the spiritual content or the radiance of a work of art and an implacable and virtuosic naturalism: it is as if the science of the mechanism of things killed their spirit, or at least ran the grave risk of killing it. On the one hand we have a treatment that is naïve, but charged with graces and diffusing an atmosphere of security, happiness, and holy childhood; while on the other hand—in classical antiquity and from the Cinquecento onwards—we have on the contrary a treatment that is scientifically executed but the content is human and not heavenly—or rather it is "humanistic"—and the work suggests, not a childhood still close to Heaven, but an adulthood fallen into disgrace and expelled from Paradise [see ills. 91 and 92].

Naturalism in art violates tradition because it is unaware that style is a providential discipline proceeding from a genius at once spiritual and ethnic and developing according to the laws of organic growth in an atmosphere of contemplative piety that has nothing individualistic or Promethean about it.



90. Our Lady of Montserrat, Spain, 12th century





91-92. Michelangelo, *Banishment from the Garden of Eden* and *Creation of Eve*, details from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome,

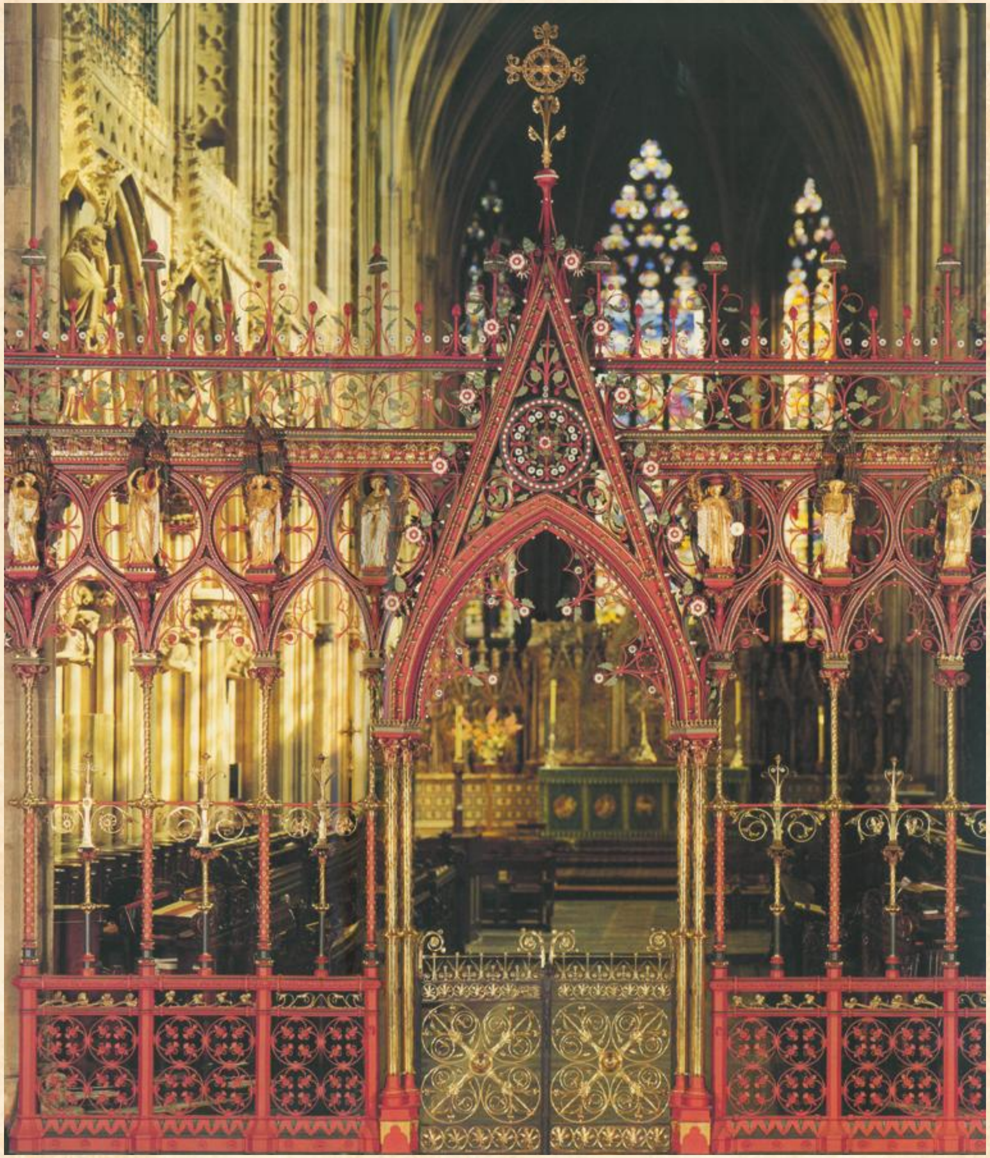
It violates the nature of things because, in painting, it treats the plane surface as if it were three-dimensional space, and the immobility of the surface as if it could contain movement; and in sculpture, naturalism treats inert matter as if it were living flesh, and then as if it were engaged in motion, and it sometimes treats one material as if it were another, without regard for the soul of each substance, and so on.[2] To paint is to re-create a vision by adapting it to the plane surface and, if there is movement, by reducing it to its essential type; to sculpture is to re-create a vision by adapting it to inanimate matter, or to a particular kind of matter, and likewise reducing it, if there is movement, to a particular phase that is as it were static. At the same time it consists in re-creating the object rather than copy-

[2] In a stylized painting, an icon, for example, or a Vishnuite miniature, the absence of three-dimensional vision and of movement does not trouble us, for the painting presents itself as such and not as a substitute for the objective world; it is not merely this or that, it is above all a painting. In naturalistic art, on the contrary, the objective accuracy of the drawing and the subtlety of the shading intensify the absence of space and movement: the figures are as though congealed in an atmosphereless void. In statuary, where inert matter and immobility create an analogous impression, the contrast between model and copy becomes intolerable and confers something spectral upon the work. Naturalism partakes of the nature of delusion and magic, but the reaction against it, since it comes from below, gives rise to much worse and strictly perverted aberrations, with the exception of a few works, or categories of works, which however do not form a school.

ing it, or in copying it while re-creating it in accordance with an inner vision at once traditional and personal, or in accordance with the life that we project into it by virtue of our knowledge, or again, in accordance with the life that it projects into us by virtue of its ontological and Divine content.

Here it is important to point out that one of the major errors of modern art is its confusion of art materials: people no longer know how to distinguish the cosmic significance of stone, iron, or wood, just as they do not know the objective qualities of forms and colors. Stone has this in common with iron that it is cold and implacable, whereas wood is warm, live, and kindly; but, while the cold of stone is neutral and indifferent like that of eternity, iron is hostile, aggressive, and ill-natured, and this enables us to understand the significance of the invasion of the world by iron.[3] The heavy and sinister nature of iron requires that in its use in handicrafts it should be treated lightly and with fantasy such as one sees for instance in old church screens which resemble lacework [see ill. 93]. The nature in iron ought to be neutralized by transparence in its treatment, for this does no violence to the nature of this metal but on the contrary confers legitimacy on its quality of hardness by thus turning it into account.

[3] The accumulation in Christian churches and places of pilgrimage of gross and harsh ironwork cannot but impede the radiation of spiritual forces. It always gives the impression that heaven is imprisoned.



93. Lady Chapel, Lichfield Cathedral, England

94. Kwannon, early Nara period, Japan, late 7th century

The reproach of "naturalism" cannot properly be leveled merely at a capacity to observe nature; it concerns rather the prejudice which would reduce art simply and solely to the imitation of nature. A more or less exact observation of nature may quite well coincide with art which is traditional, symbolical, and sacred, as is proved by the art of the Egypt of the Pharaohs or that of the Far East; it is then the result, not of a passionate and empty naturalism, but of an objectivity which is fundamentally intellectual. The spiritualized realism of Chinese landscape painters has nothing in common with worldly aestheticism.

As for simple lack of physical observation, which as such is independent of any symbolical intention, we would add that, where it is conditioned by the requirements of a particular collective soul, it is an integral part of a style and so of a language which is in itself intelligent and noble; this is something quite different from the technical clumsiness of some isolated artist. Complete naturalism, which reproduces the chance variations and accidental aspect of appearances, is truly an abuse of intelligence such as might be called "luciferian":[4] it could not, therefore, characterize traditional art.

The whole of the so-called "Greek miracle" amounts to a substitution of reason alone for intelligence as such; apart from the rationalism which inaugurated it, artistic naturalism would have been inconceivable. Extreme naturalism results from the cult of "form," of form envisaged as something finite and not as "symbol"; reason indeed regulates the science of the finite, of limits, and of order, so that it is only logical that an art which is directed by reason should share with reason itself a flatness refractory to all mystery. The art of classical antiquity is often compared to the brightness of full daylight; it

[4] This abuse of intelligence is extremely characteristic of modern civilization. Many things are taken to be superior—as indeed they are if considered in artificial isolation—which are in fact merely hypertrophic; artistic naturalism is just that, at any rate when taken as an end in itself and when it consequently expresses nothing more than the limitations of form and of the accidental.

is forgotten that it also has the "outward" quality of daylight, which lacks any aspect of the secret and the infinite.

In the Middle Ages a religious man could pray in surroundings where everything testified to a homogeneous spirit and to an intelligence supernaturally inspired; he could also pray before a blank wall. He had a choice between the ever truthful language of precious forms and the silence of rough stones. Happily for him he had no other choice.

There is something in our intelligence which wants to live in repose, something in which the conscious and the unconscious meet in a kind of passive activity, and it is to this element that the lofty and easy language of art addresses itself. The language is lofty because of the spiritual symbolism of its forms and the nobility of its style; it is easy because of the aesthetic mode of assimilation. When this function of our spirit, this intuition which stands between the natural and the supernatural and produces incalculable vibrations, is systematically violated and led into error, the consequences will be extremely serious, if not for the individual, at all events for the civilization concerned.

Would a child want its mother to change countenance every day? Would a man want to rearrange his home every day? A sanctuary is like the outstretched arms of a mother and like the intimacy of a home, and the soul and the intelligence must be able to rest in it.

Nothing is more monotonous than the illusions of originality found in men who have been inculcated from childhood with an exaggerated respect for "creative genius."

We must never lose sight of the fact that as soon as art ceases to be a pure and simple ideography—which is perfectly within its rights, for how should the decorative element of art be banned when it is everywhere in nature?—it has a mission from which nothing can make it deviate. This mission is to transmit spiritual values, whether these are saving truths or cosmic qualities, including human virtues.

95. King Khafre seated, 4th dynasty of the Old Kingdom, Egypt, 2520-2492 B.C.

96. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Jupiter and Thetis*, 1811

Nothing can be better fitted to influence the deeper dispositions of the soul than sacred art. Profane art, on the contrary, even if it be of some psychological value in the case of souls of inferior intelligence, soon exhausts its means, by the very fact of their superficiality and vulgarity, after which it can only provoke reactions of contempt; these are only too common, and may be considered as a rebound of the contempt in which sacred art was held by profane art.

But let us return to the errors of naturalism. Art, as soon as it is no longer determined, illuminated, and guided by spirituality, lies at the mercy of the individual and purely psychic resources of the artist, and these resources must soon run out, if only because of the very platitude of the naturalistic principle that merely calls for a superficial copying of nature. Reaching the extreme limit of its own platitude, naturalism inevitably engendered the monstrosities of surrealism. The latter is but the decomposing body of an art and in any case should rather be called "infrarealism."

The agreement of a picture with nature is legitimate only insofar as it does not abolish the separation between the work of art and its outward model; without such separation the former loses its sufficient reason, for its purpose is not merely to repeat what already exists; the exactness of its proportions must neither do violence to the material—the plane surface in the case of painting and the inert material in the case of sculpture—nor compromise the spiritual expression;[5] if the correctness of the proportions is in accord with the material data of the particular art while also satisfying the spiritual intention of the work, it will add an expression of intelligence and so also of truth to the

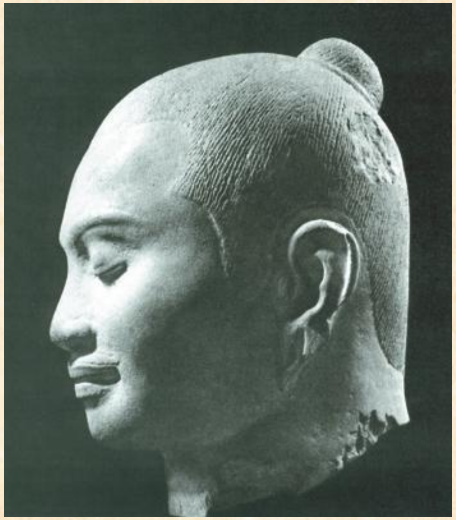
[5] The ostentatiously human perfection of classical or academic art has in reality nothing universally convincing about it: this was noticed long ago, but only in order to fall into the contrary excess, namely, the cult of ugliness and of the inhuman, despite a few intermediary oases, certain impressionists, for example. The classicism of a Canova or an Ingres no longer convinces anyone, but that is no reason for acknowledging only Melanesian fetishes.

symbolism of the work. Authentic and normative art always tends to combine intelligent observation of nature with noble and profound stylizations in order, first, to assimilate the work to the model created by God in nature and, secondly, to separate it from physical contingency by giving it an imprint of pure spirit, of synthesis, of what is essential. It can definitely be said that naturalism is legitimate insofar as physical exactness is allied to a vision of the Platonic Idea, the qualitative archetype; hence, in such works, the predominance of the static, of symmetry, of the essential.[6]

As regards beauty in naturalistic art, it does not reside in the work as such, but solely in the object that it copies, whereas in symbolic and traditional art it is the work in itself that is beautiful, whether it be abstract or whether it borrow beauty in a greater or lesser degree from a natural model. It would be difficult to find a better illustration of this distinction than that afforded by a comparison between so-called classical Greek art and Egyptian art: the beauty of the latter does not, in fact, lie simply and solely in the object represented, but resides simultaneously and *a fortiori* in the work as such, that is to say, in the inward reality that the work makes manifest. The fact that naturalistic art has sometimes succeeded in expressing nobility of feeling or vigorous intelligence is not in question and may be explained by cosmological reasons that could not but exist [see ill. 102].

What is normal is that a human being should seek his center of inspiration beyond himself, beyond his sterility as a poor sinner: this will force him into making ceaseless corrections and a continuous adjustment in the face of an external norm, in short, into changes which will compensate for his ignorance and lack of universality. A normal artist touches up his work, not because he is dishonest, but because he takes account of his own imperfection; a good man corrects himself wherever he can.

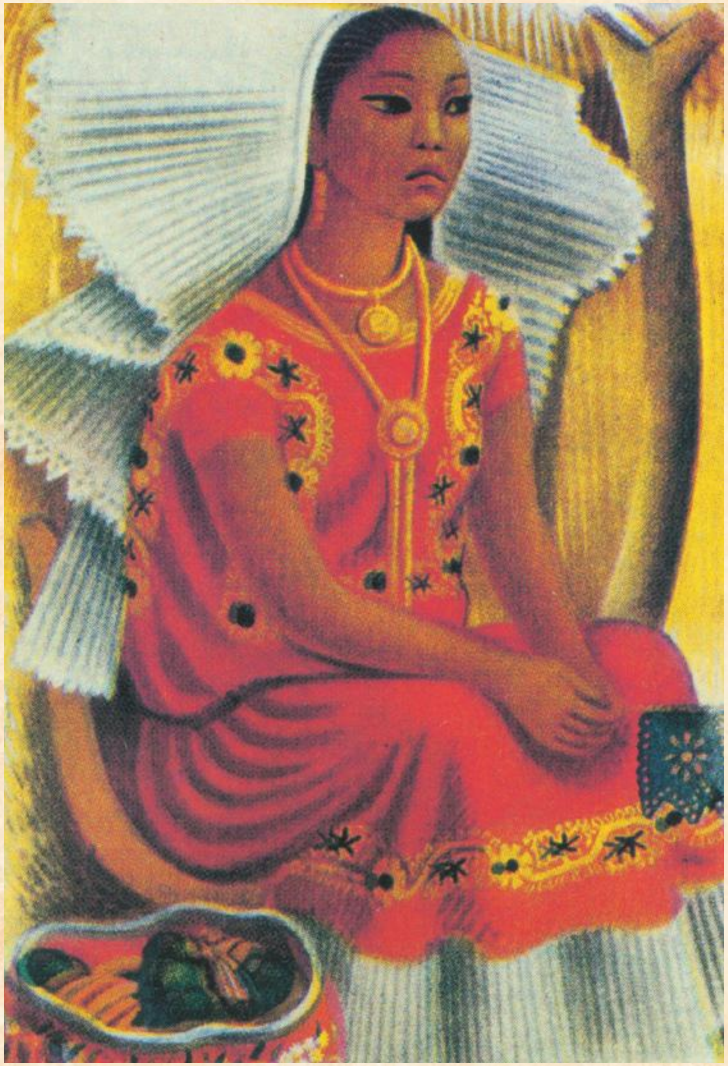
[6] In this connection Egyptian art is particularly instructive; other examples of this coincidence of "natural" and "essential" can be found in Far-Eastern art and also in the admirable bronze and pottery heads found among the Yorubas of Ife in West Africa which are among the most perfect works of art to be found anywhere [see ills. 97, 98, and 99].

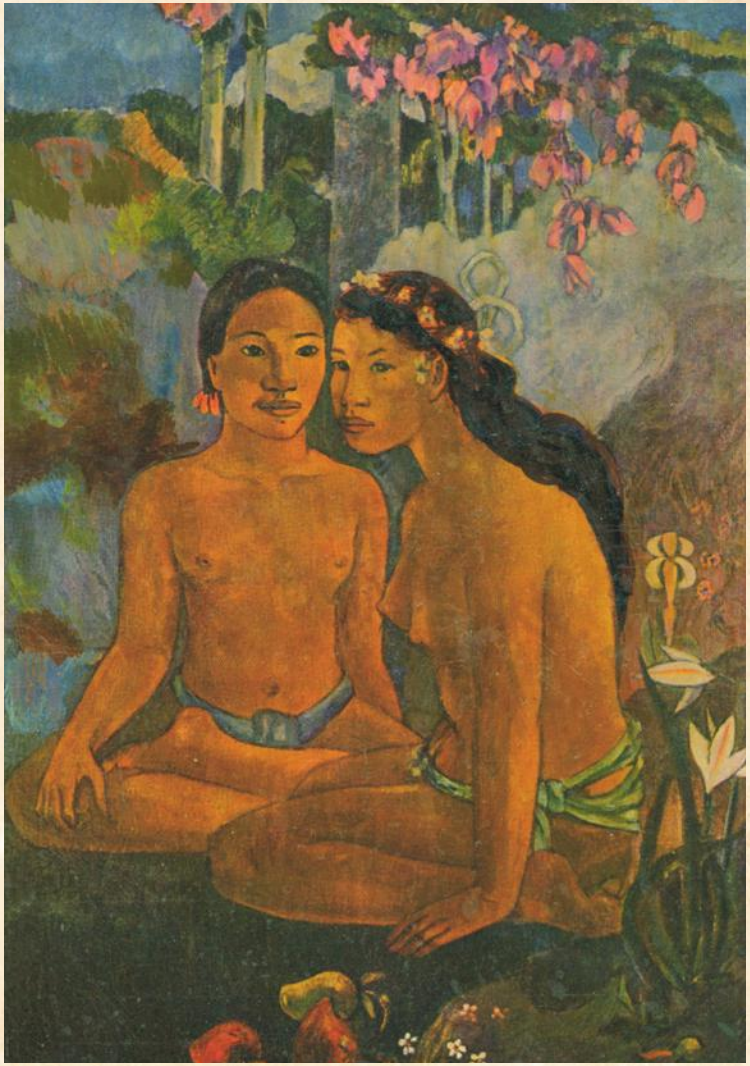


97. Portrait of a priest king, Ife, Nigeria, c. 12th century
98. Portrait of a queen, Benin, Nigeria, 16th century
99. King Jayavarman VII, Cambodia, 12th century

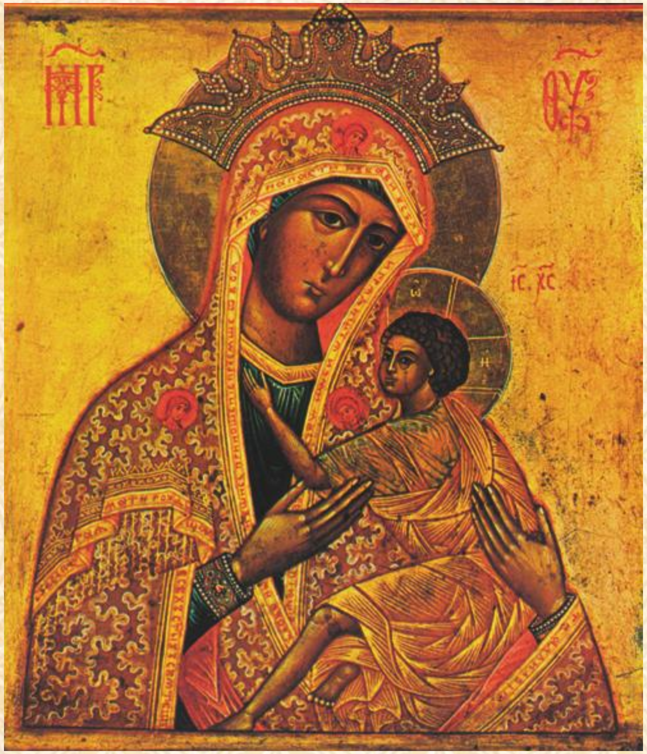
The work of an artist is not a training in spontaneity—talent is not something that is acquired—but a humble and instructed search, either assiduous or joyously carefree, for perfection of form and expression according to sacred prototypes which are both heavenly and collective in their inspiration. Such inspiration in no wise excludes the inspiration of the individual but gives it its range of action and at the same time guarantees its spiritual value. The artist effaces and forgets himself; all the better if genius gives him wings. But before all else his work retraces that of the soul which transforms itself in conformity with a divine Model.

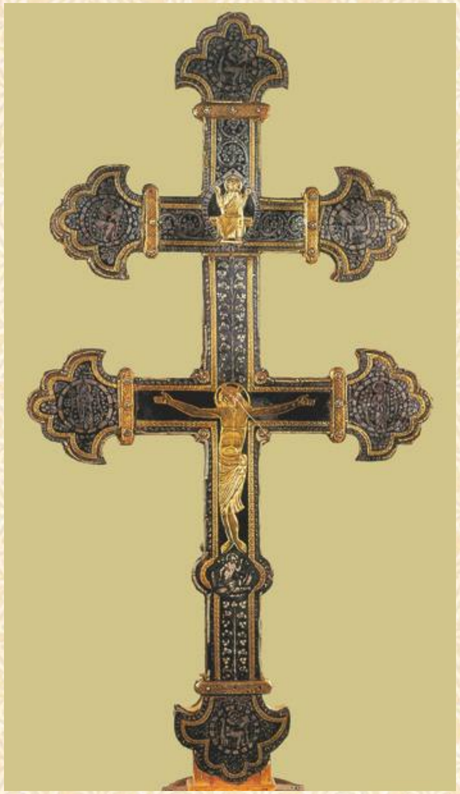
100. King Menkaure and his Queen, Egypt, c. 2500 B.C.
101. Praxiteles, *Hermes with the Infant Dionysos*, 4th century B.C.
102. Donatello, *Saint George*, c. 1415-1417

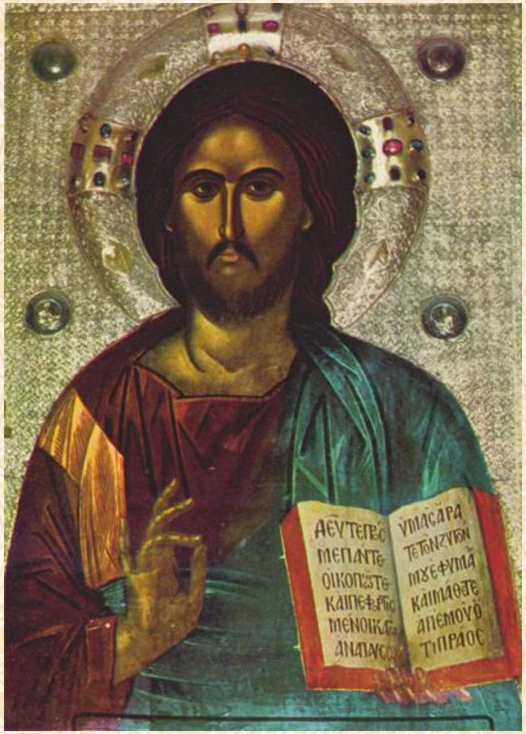




103. Miguel Covarrubias, *Girl Dressed-up for Festival*, mid 20th century; **104**. Paul Gauguin, *Barbarian Tales*, 1902







105. Our Lady of Sofronov, Russia, 16th century
106. Cross-reliquary from Clairmarais Abbey, c. 1230
107. Icon of Christ from the Katholikon of the Great Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos

Christian Art

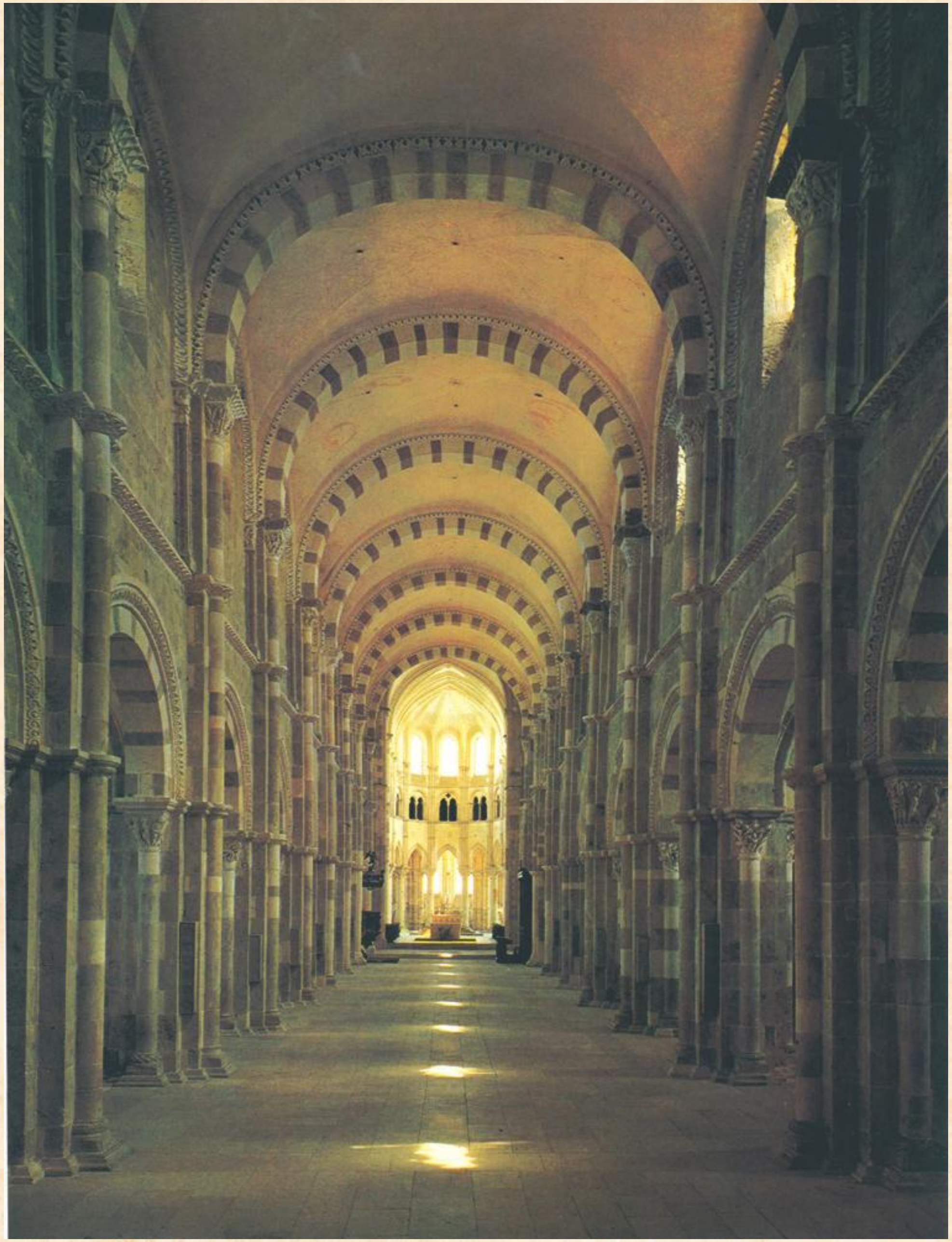
In traditional worlds, to be situated in space and time is to be situated in a cosmology and in an eschatology respectively; time has no meaning save in relation to the perfection of the origin and the maintenance of that perfection, and in view of the final breaking up that casts us almost without transition at the feet of God. If as time went on there were sometimes developments which could be taken to have been progressive when isolated from the whole—in the formulation of doctrine for example, or especially in art, which needs time and experience to ripen—this does not imply that tradition can be regarded as having become different or better, but on the contrary that it wants to remain wholly itself, or to "become what it is"; or in other words, that traditional humanity wants to manifest or to exteriorize at a particular level something that it carries within itself and is in danger of losing; and the danger increases as the cycle unfolds, the cycle inevitably ending in decline and Judgment. It is therefore our increasing weakness, and therewith the risk of forgetfulness and betrayal, which more than anything else obliges us to exteriorize and to make explicit things that were at the beginning included in an inward and implicit perfection. Saint Paul had no need either of Thomism or of Cathedrals, for all profundities and all splendors were within himself, and all around him in the sanctity of the primitive community. And this, so far from supporting iconoclasts of all kinds, refutes them completely; more or less late epochs—the Middle Ages for example—are faced with an imperious need for exteriorizations and developments, exactly as the water from a spring, if it is not to be lost on its way, needs a channel made by nature or by the hand of man; and just as the channel does not transform the water and is not meant to do so—for no water is better than spring water—so the exteriorizations and developments of the spiritual patrimony are there, not to change that patrimony, but to transmit it as integrally and as effectively as possible.

108. "*In you rejoices, O full of Grace, all creation*," Moscow, late 16th-early 17th century

109. Iconostasis of the Russian Orthodox Monastery Church of the Holy Trinity, Jordanville, New York

Starting from the idea that the liturgy is the garment of the spiritual order and that in a religious, and hence normal, civilization nothing is wholly independent of the sacred, it will be admitted that the liturgy in the most ample sense of the term embraces all forms related to the arts and crafts insofar as they are referable to the sacred, and that, for this very reason, these forms cannot be just anything. Now, what has to be stressed here is that artistic liturgy—or liturgic art—has been radically false for several centuries, as if there were no longer any relation between the visible and the Invisible; it would be absurd to maintain that this state of affairs has no influence whatever on the spiritual order, as regards the general conditions governing ambience and development. A particular saint may have no need of imaginative and aesthetic symbolism, but the collectivity needs it and the collectivity must be able to produce saints; whether one likes it or not, the great things in this world are bound up with the little things, at least extrinsically, and it would be abnormal to see in the outward expressions of a tradition merely a facade.

Christian art is founded, from a doctrinal point of view, on the mystery of the Son, "Image" of the Father, or the mystery of God "become man" (or image) in order that man (made in the image of God) might "become God." In this art the central element is painting: tradition says that it goes back



110. Nave of Sainte Madeleine, Vézelay, France, 12th century

111. *The Virgin*, mosaic of the central apse, Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, near Venice, 13th century

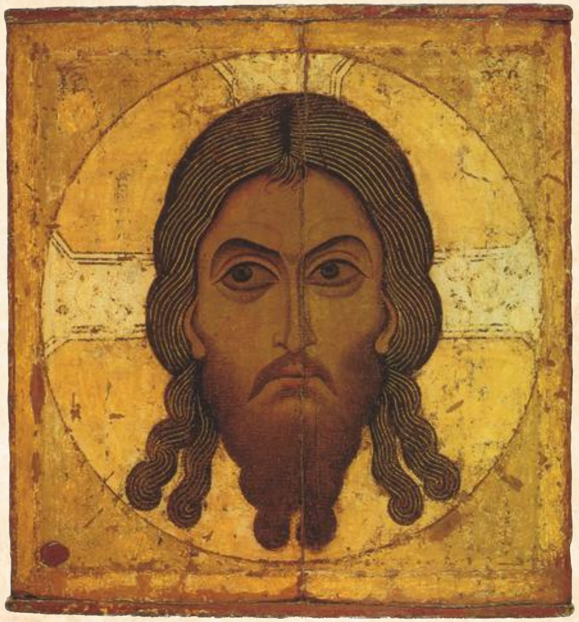
112. *St. Peter Blessing*, mosaic in San Marco Basilica, Venice, end of 12th century

to the likeness of Christ miraculously imprinted on a cloth sent to King Abgar, as also to the portrait of the Virgin Mary painted by Saint Luke; another archetype of icons of the Blessed Face is, by its very nature, the Holy Shroud, prototype of the sacred portraits, and then the Crucifix. The Seventh Ecumenical Council declared that "the painting of icons was in no wise an invention of painters, but is on the contrary an established institution and tradition of the Church."[1]

By painting the first icon of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Luke introduced painting into Christianity and created the entire artistic dimension of this religion, which has been maintained in the Eastern Church.

The majority of moderns who claim to understand art are convinced that Byzantine or Romanesque art is in no way superior to modern art, and that a Byzantine or Romanesque Virgin resembles Mary no more than do her naturalistic images, in fact rather the contrary. The answer is, however, quite simple: the Byzantine Virgin—which traditionally goes back to Saint Luke and the Angels—is infinitely closer to the truth of Mary than a naturalistic image, which of necessity is always that of another woman. Only one of two things is possible: either the artist presents an absolutely correct portrait of the Virgin from a physical point of view, in which case it will be necessary for the artist to have seen the Virgin, a condition that cannot easily be fulfilled—setting aside the fact that all purely naturalistic painting is illegitimate—or else the artist will present a perfectly adequate symbol of the Virgin, but in this case physical resemblance, without being absolutely excluded, is no longer in question. It is this second solution that is realized in icons; what they do not express by means of a physical resemblance they express by the abstract but immediate language of symbolism, a language that is made at once of precision and imponderables. Thus the icon, in addition to the beatific power

[1] The icon painters were monks who, before setting to work, prepared themselves by fasting, prayer, confession, and communion; it even happened that the colors were mixed with holy water and the dust from relics, as would not have been possible had the icon not possessed a truly sacramental character.



113. The Shroud of Turin, Italy; **114**. Icon of the Holy Face "Not Made by Hands," School of Novgorod, Russia, 12th century

115. Simone Martini, *The Annunciation*, retable, 1333

that is inherent in it by reason of its sacramental character, transmits the holiness or inner reality of the Virgin and hence the universal reality of which the Virgin herself is an expression; in suggesting both a contemplative experience and a metaphysical truth, the icon becomes a support of intellection, whereas a naturalistic image transmits—apart from its obvious and inevitable falsehood—only the fact that Mary was a woman. It is true that in the case of a particular icon it may happen that the proportions and features are those of the living Virgin, but such a likeness, if it really came to pass, would be independent of the symbolism of the image and could only be the result of a special inspiration. Naturalistic art could moreover be legitimate up to a certain point if it were used exclusively to record the features of the saints, since the contemplation of saints (the Hindu *darshan*) can be a very precious help on the spiritual way, owing to the fact that their outward appearance conveys, as it were, the perfume of their spirituality; but the use in this limited manner of a partial and disciplined naturalism corresponds only to a very remote possibility.

To come back to the symbolic and spiritual quality of the icon: one's ability to perceive the spiritual quality of an icon or any other symbol is a question of contemplative intelligence and also of "sacred science." However, it is certainly false to claim, in justification of naturalism, that the people need an accessible, that is to say, a platitudinous art, for it is not the people who gave birth to the Renaissance; the art of the latter, like all the "fine art" that is derived from it, is, on the contrary, an offense to the piety of the simple person. The artistic ideals of the Renaissance and of all modern art are therefore very far removed from what the people need, and in fact nearly all the miraculous Virgins to which the people flock are Byzantine or Romanesque; and who would presume to argue that the black color of some of them agrees with popular taste or is particularly accessible to it?

Far from serving only for the more or less superficial instruction and edification of the masses, the icon, as is the case with the Hindu *yantra* and all other visible symbols, establishes a bridge from the sensible to the spiritual: "By the visible aspect," states Saint John Damascene, "our thoughts must be

116. The "Mesopanditissa" (Mediatrix of Peace), Venice, 11th century

117. Iconostasis, Cathedral of the Annunciation, Moscow, 1489

drawn up in a spiritual flight and rise to the invisible majesty of God."

Besides the icons of Christ and the Virgin, there are also a multitude of other hieratic images, relating the facts of sacred history and the lives of the saints; likewise in Buddhist iconography, after the central images come the numerous representations of secondary personifications; it is this more or less peripheral category which may be called indirect sacred art, even though there may not always be a rigorous line of demarcation between it and direct or central sacred art. The function of this ramification—apart from its didactic significance—is to enable the spirit of the central images to shine through a diverse imagery which rivets the movement of the mind by infusing into it the radiance of the Immutable, and which, in so doing, imposes on the moving soul a tendency towards interiorization; this function is thus entirely analogous to that of hagiography or even to that of stories of chivalry, not forgetting fairy tales whose symbolism, as is well known, belongs to the realm of the spiritual and so to that of the sacred.

In Christianity the sacred emanates from the sacrament, which confers upon the collective sense of the sacred its characteristic quality, notably the taste for solemnity, without forgetting the splendor of the liturgical art, such as the iconostases, the golden retables, and the priestly vestments.

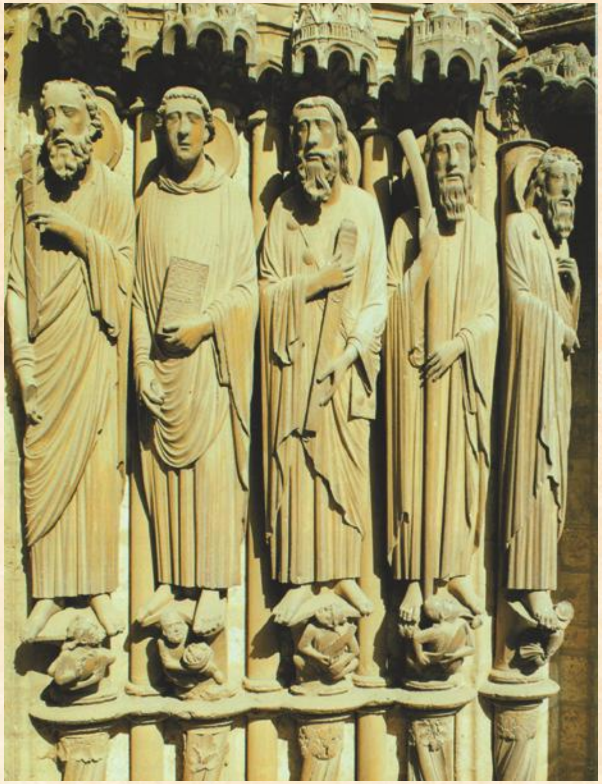
Byzantine, Romanesque, and primitive Gothic arts are theologies: they proclaim God, or rather "realize" Him on a certain level.

The pseudo-Christian art inaugurated by the neo-paganism of the Renaissance seeks and realizes only man. The mysteries it should suggest are suffocated in a din of superficiality and inability, inevitable features of individualism; in any case it inflicts immense harm on society, above all by its ignorant hypocrisy. How should it be otherwise, seeing that this art is only disguised paganism and takes no account in its formal language of the contemplative chastity and the immaterial beauty of the spirit of the Gospels? How can one unreservedly call "sacred" an art which, forgetful of the quasi-sacramental character of holy images and forgetful, too, of the traditional rules of the crafts, holds up to the veneration of the faithful carnal and showy copies of nature and even portraits of concubines painted by libertines? In the ancient Church, and in the Eastern Churches even down to our own times, icon painters prepared themselves for their work by fasting, by prayer, and by sacraments; to the inspiration which had fixed the immutable type of the image they added their own humble and pious inspirations; and they scrupulously respected the symbolism—always susceptible of an endless series of precious nuances—of the forms and colors. They drew their creative joy, not from inventing pretentious novelties, but from a loving recreation of the revealed prototypes, and this resulted in a spiritual and artistic perfection such as no individual genius could ever attain.

In the sixteenth century the Patriarch Nikon ordered the destruction of icons influenced by the Renaissance and threatened with excommunication those who painted or owned such paintings. After him the Patriarch Joachim required—in his last will and testament—that icons should always be painted according to ancient models and not "follow Latin or German models, which are invented according to the personal whim of the artist and corrupt the tradition of the Church." Many texts of this kind could be cited.[2]

[2] In India, tradition speaks of the painter Chitrakara who was cursed by a *brahmin* for having broken the rules in the composition of a painting for which he had received a commission.

118. His Beatitude Damianos, Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, head of the Greek Church



119. Cathedral of Reims, France, 13th century
120. Figures on the South doorway, Chartres Cathedral, 13th century

If painted pictures are a necessary expression of Christian spirituality, sculptured images have only a secondary necessity which is also more or less "local." A cathedral covered with sculpture is assuredly a profound and powerful expression of Christianity, but one that is essentially determined by a fusion of Teutonic with Latin genius. A Gothic facade aims at embodying a preaching as concretely as possible; it may include esoteric elements—and indeed must do so by reason of its symbolism—but it has not the

quasi-sacramental character of an iconostasis. One of the glories of the Western cathedral is its stained glass, which is like an opening towards heaven: the rose-window is like a sparkling symbol of the metaphysical universe, of the cosmic reverberations of the "Self."

Latin Christianity has never been able to eradicate completely the paganism of antiquity. After having smouldered for centuries beneath the spiritual and artistic marvels of medieval civilization, it broke out and appeared in a heavier and more brutal form. It took its revenge by destroying, on the intellectual level as well as on the artistic[3] and other levels, the normal expressions of the Christian genius.

The Renaissance, an imperialism of bourgeois and bankers, was on the level of forms an intrinsic heresy.

The Renaissance still retained certain qualities of intelligence and grandeur, whereas the Baroque style could hardly express anything but the spiritual penury and the hollow and miserable turgidity of its period.

Late Gothic statuary has all the characteristics of a dense and unintelligent bourgeois art; the Renaissance was in a strong position in setting against it the noble and intelligent art of a Donatello or a Cellini. But none the less, taken as a whole, the misdeeds of Gothic art are a small matter beside those of the profane, passionate, and pompous art of the Renaissance.

No doubt bad taste and incapacity are to be met with everywhere, but tradition neutralizes them and reduces them to a minimum that is always tolerable.

[3] We are here referring to the full development of the Renaissance style, as found in Michelangelo, Titian, or Correggio, not to the painting of the Quattrocento, which is often virginal and tender and is in any case still Christian [see ills. 115 and 123].

121. Church of the Theatines, Munich, 17th century
122. Shrine of the Holy Cross, Rome, early 18th century

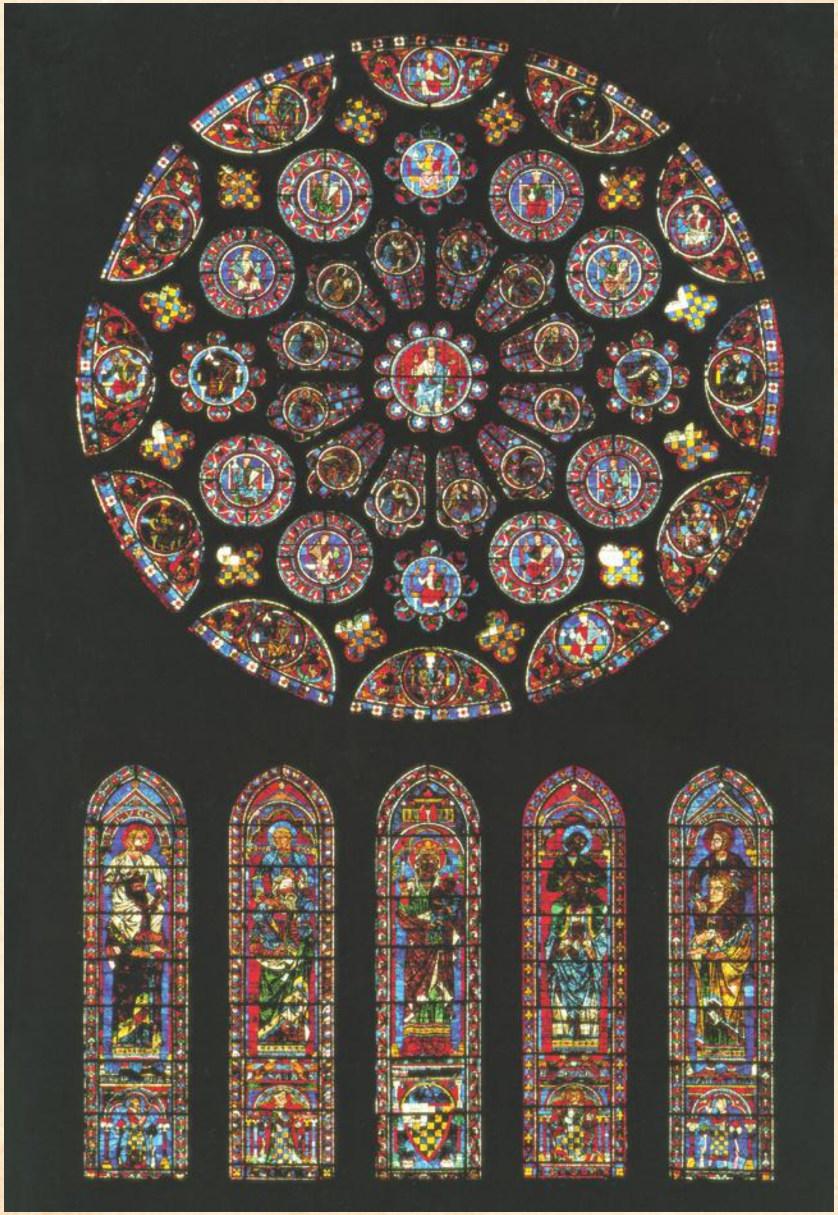
123. Simone Martini, *Maestà* (Madonna with Angels and Saints), 1320

The first thing that strikes one in a traditional masterpiece is its intelligence: an intelligence which surprises both by its complexity and by its power of synthesis, an intelligence which envelops, penetrates, and uplifts.[4]

Humanly speaking some artists of the Renaissance are great, but with a greatness which becomes small in the face of the greatness of the sacred. In sacred art genius is as it were hidden; what is dominant is an impersonal, vast, and mysterious intelligence. A sacred work of art has a fragrance of infinity, an imprint of the absolute. In it individual talent is disciplined; it is intermingled with the creative function of the tradition as a whole; this cannot be replaced, far less can it be surpassed, by human resources.

[4] When standing before a cathedral one truly feels situated at the center of the world; standing before a church of the Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo period, one merely feels oneself to be in Europe.

English architecture was less devastated by the Renaissance and by the Baroque than that of most continental countries. It may be that, by one of those paradoxes of which history is prodigal, Anglicanism preserved (against Rome), a certain medieval heritage in matters of art, and this would seem to have been the less unlikely since the English are less creative than the Italians, Germans, or French. Something analogous could no doubt be said about the popular architecture of Spain and particularly of Andalusia where Arab influence seems to have played the part of a preserver.

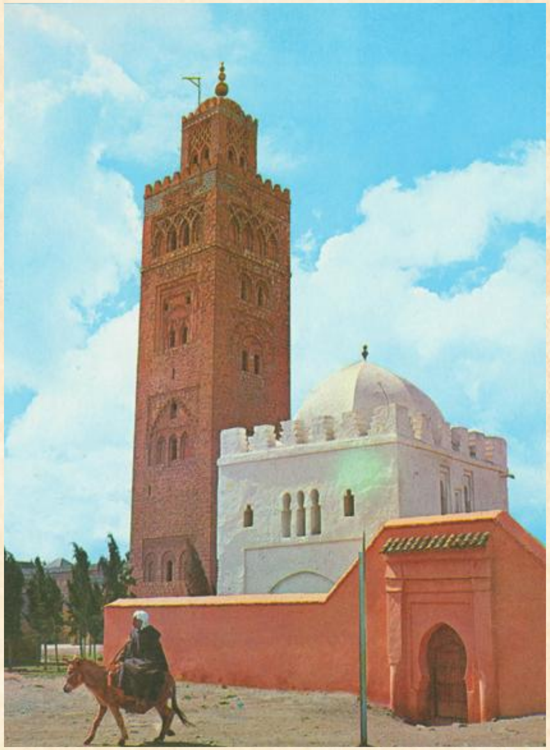


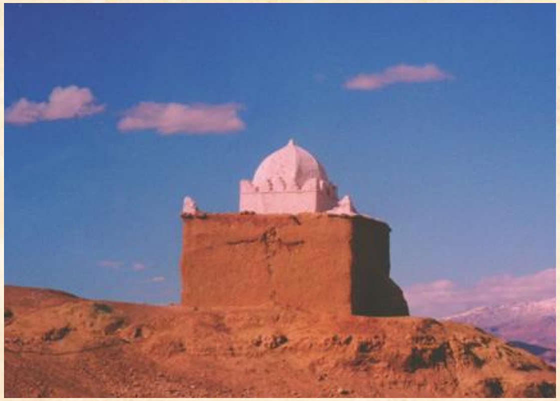
124. Rose window of the South transept, Chartres Cathedral, 13th century

125. Koran page in Eastern Kufic script, Iraq, Persia, or Afghanistan, 1092
126. Koran page in Naskh script, Cairo, 1368

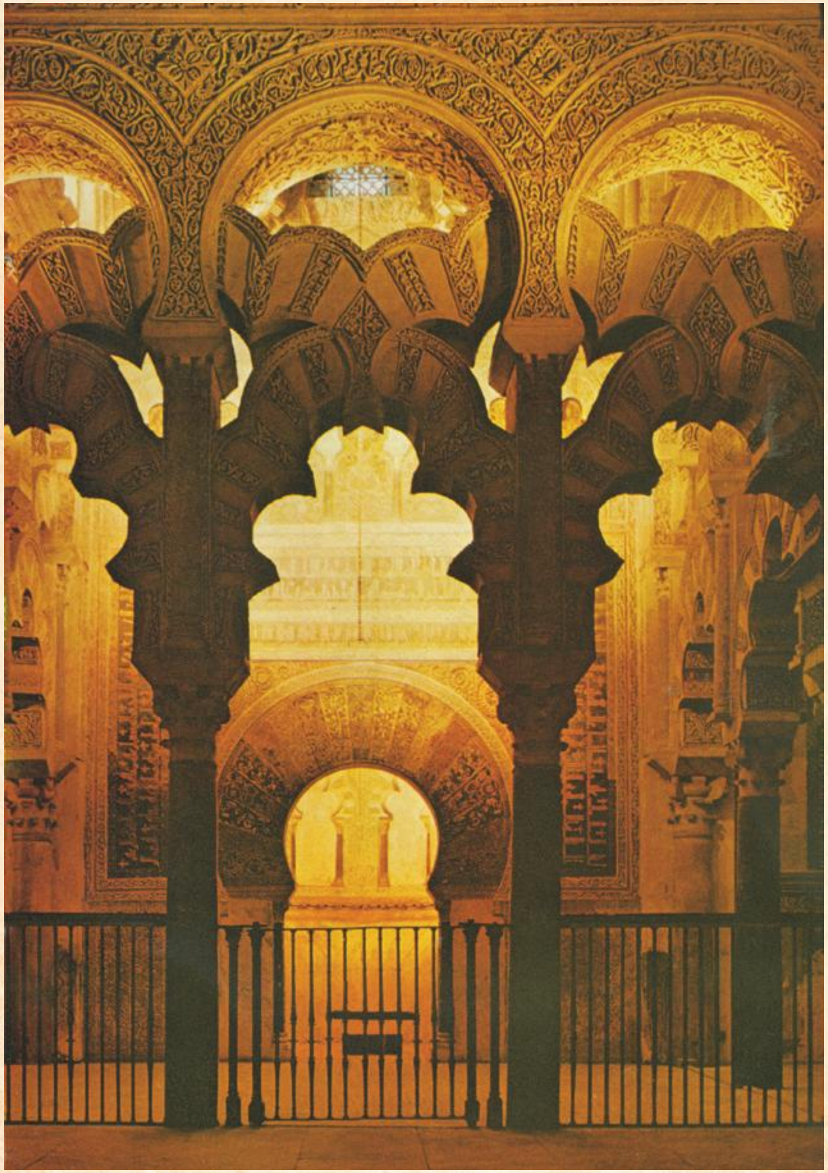
Islamic Art

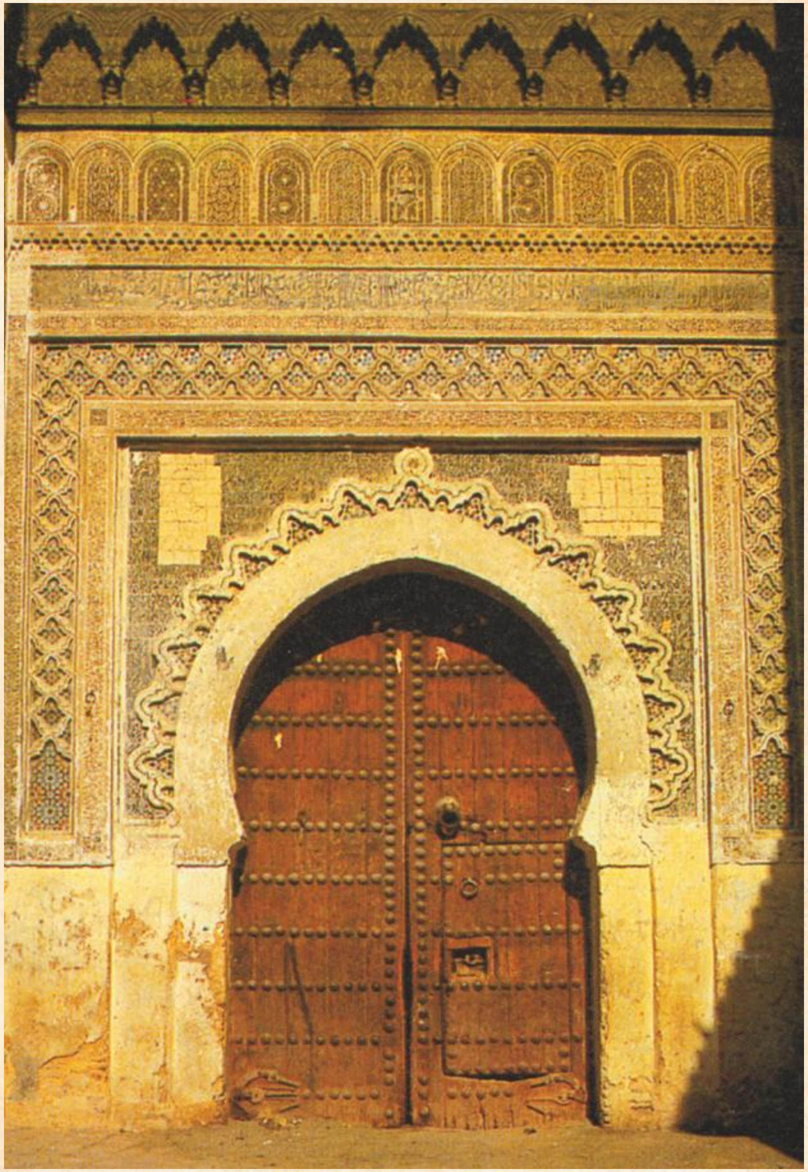
The non-figurative or abstract arts of Judaism and Islam must not be overlooked. The former was revealed in the Torah itself and is exclusively sacerdotal. The latter is akin to it by its exclusion of human and animal representations; as to its origin, it issued from the sensory form of the revealed Book, that is, from the interlaced letters of the verses of the Koran, and also—paradoxical though this may seem—from the forbidding of images. This restriction in Islamic art, by eliminating certain creative possibilities, intensified others, the more so since it was accompanied by express permission to represent plants; hence the capital importance of arabesques, of geometrical and botanical decorative motifs. Islamic architecture, inherited from the neighboring civilizations, was transmuted by its own particular genius which tended at the same time both to simplification and to ornamentation; the purest expression of this genius is perhaps the art of the Maghrib, where no pre-existing formalism invited concessions. In Islam the love of beauty compensates for the tendency to austere simplicity; it lends elegant forms to simplicity and partially clothes it in a profusion of precious and abstract lacework. "God is Beautiful," said the Prophet, "and He loveth Beauty."





127. Mosque of Muzdalifah, Saudi Arabia, 20th century
128. Qutubiyyah Mosque, Marrakesh , 12th century
129. Saint's tomb, Morocco





130. The prayer niche (*mihrab*) of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, Spain, 10th century; **131**. Door of a mansion, Meknes, Morocco

Islamic art allies the joyous profusion of vegetation with the pure and abstract severity of crystals: a prayer niche adorned with arabesques owes something to a garden and to snowflakes. This mixture of qualities is already to be met with in the Koran where the geometry of the ideas is as it were hidden under the flamboyance of forms.

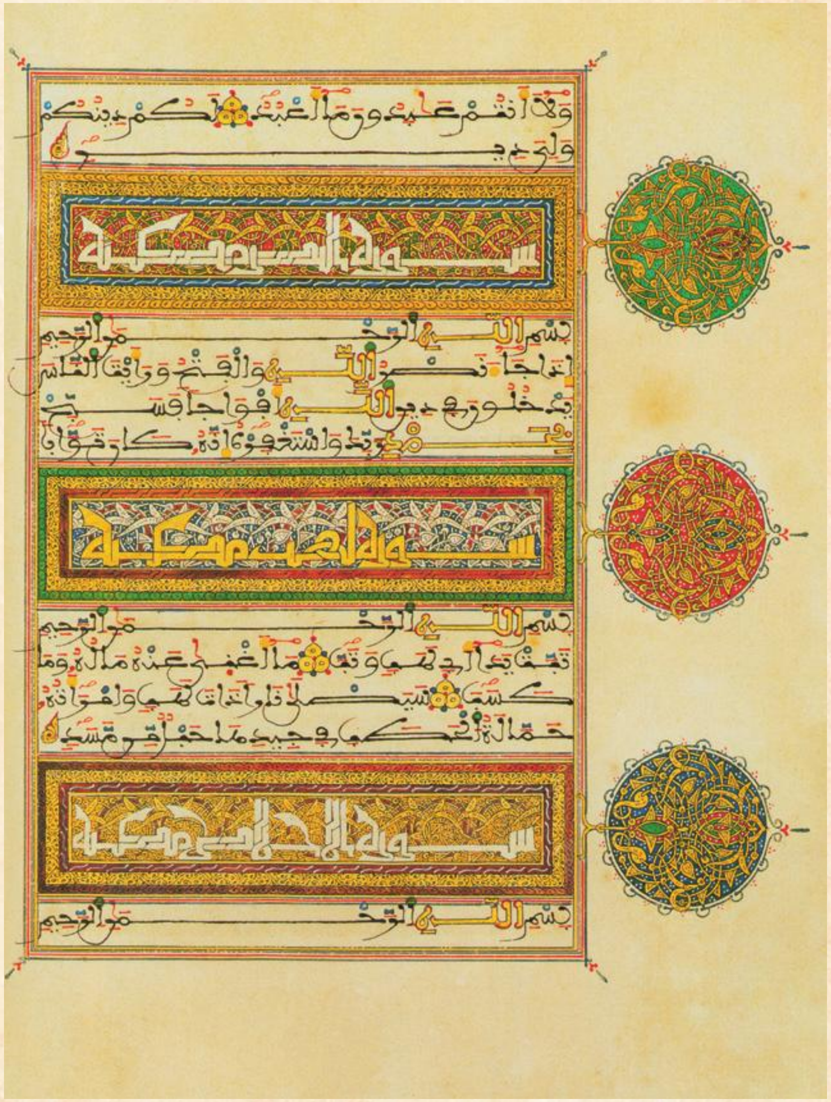
Islam, being possessed by the idea of Unity, if one may so put it, has also an aspect of the simplicity of the desert, of whiteness, and of austerity, which, in its art, alternates with the crystalline joy of ornamentation. The cradle of the Arabs is a landscape of deserts and oases.

Let us also mention the verbal theophany which is the psalmodized recitation of the revealed texts,[1] calligraphy being its visual mode;[2] or again, in Islam, the canonical prayer, the majestic movement of which expresses the sacred in a manner that from the point of view in question is not without relation to the *mūdra*s of India.

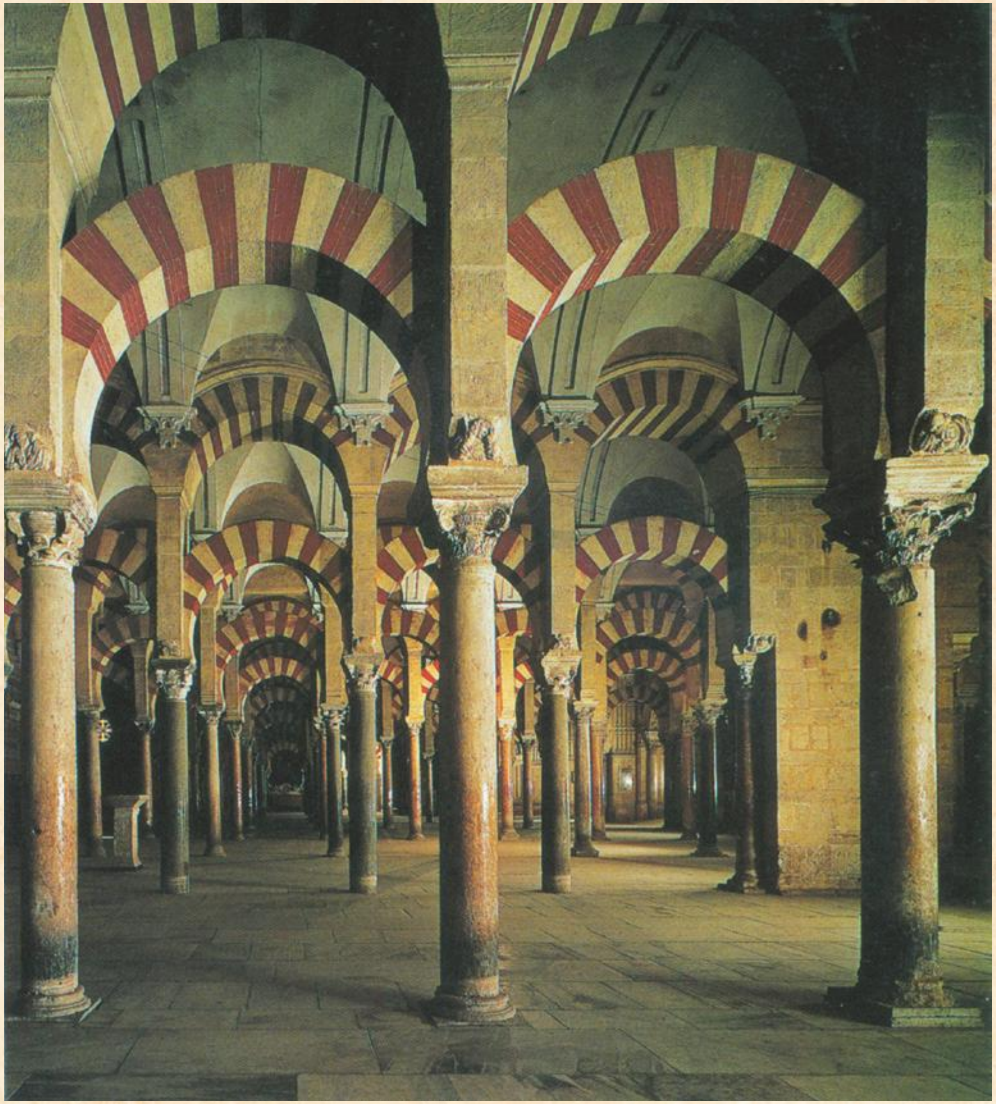
Christianity corresponds to a volitive decision between the here-below and the hereafter; Islam, on the other hand, is a

[1] For instance, the chanting of the Koran, which can be in various styles, is an art; a choice can be made between one style or another, but nothing can be added to them; one can chant the Koran in certain ways, but not in others. The modes of chanting express different rhythms of the spirit.

[2] Outside the Far East, there are scarcely any but the Muslim peoples who possess calligraphies equivalent to the Chinese ideograms, thanks not only to the richness and plasticity of the Arabic characters, but also to the concentration—due to religious reasons—of the pictorial instinct on writing alone.



132. Page of a Koran in Maghribi script, Morocco, 1729-1730

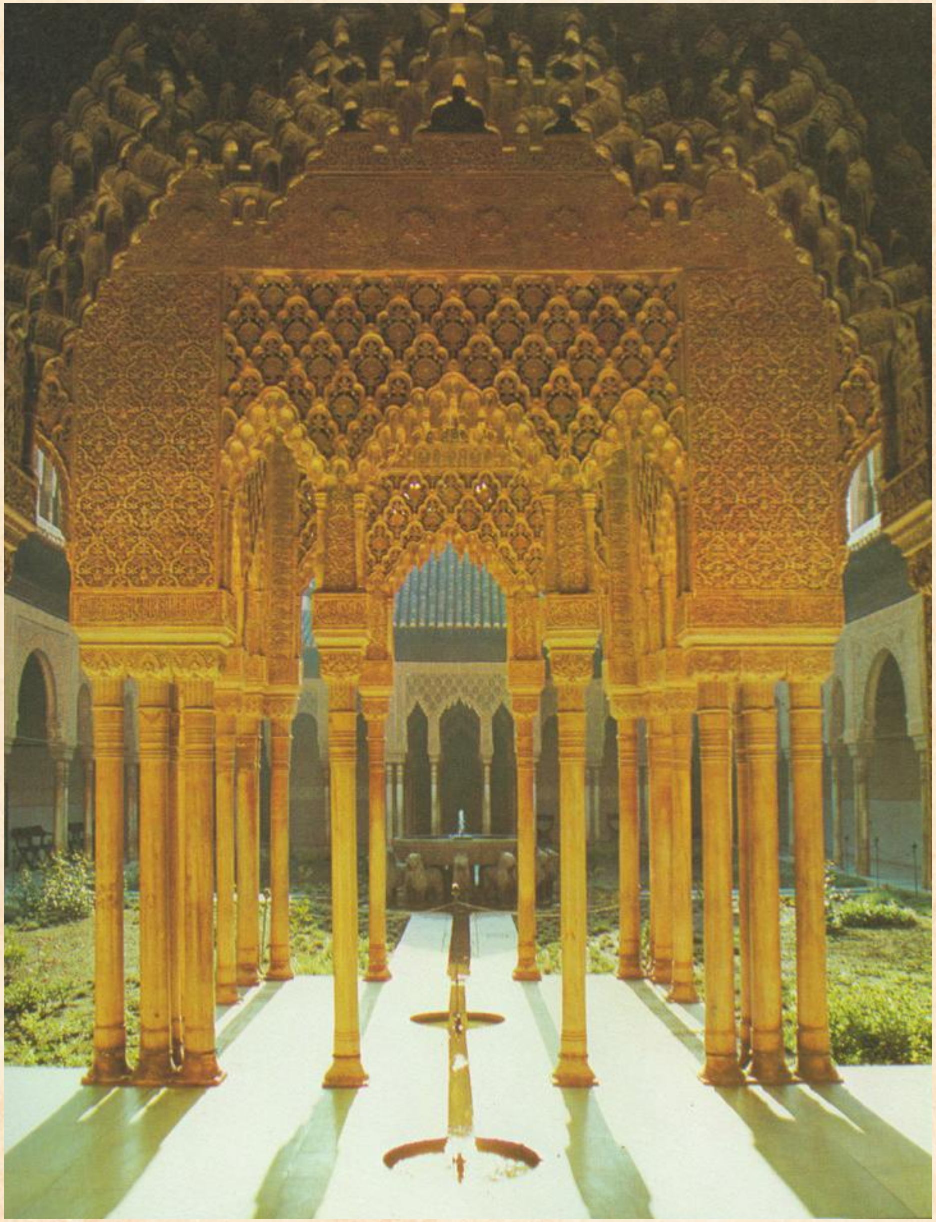


133. Interior of the Qutubiyyah Mosque, Marrakesh, Morocco, 12th century; **134**. Arches of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, Spain, 8th century

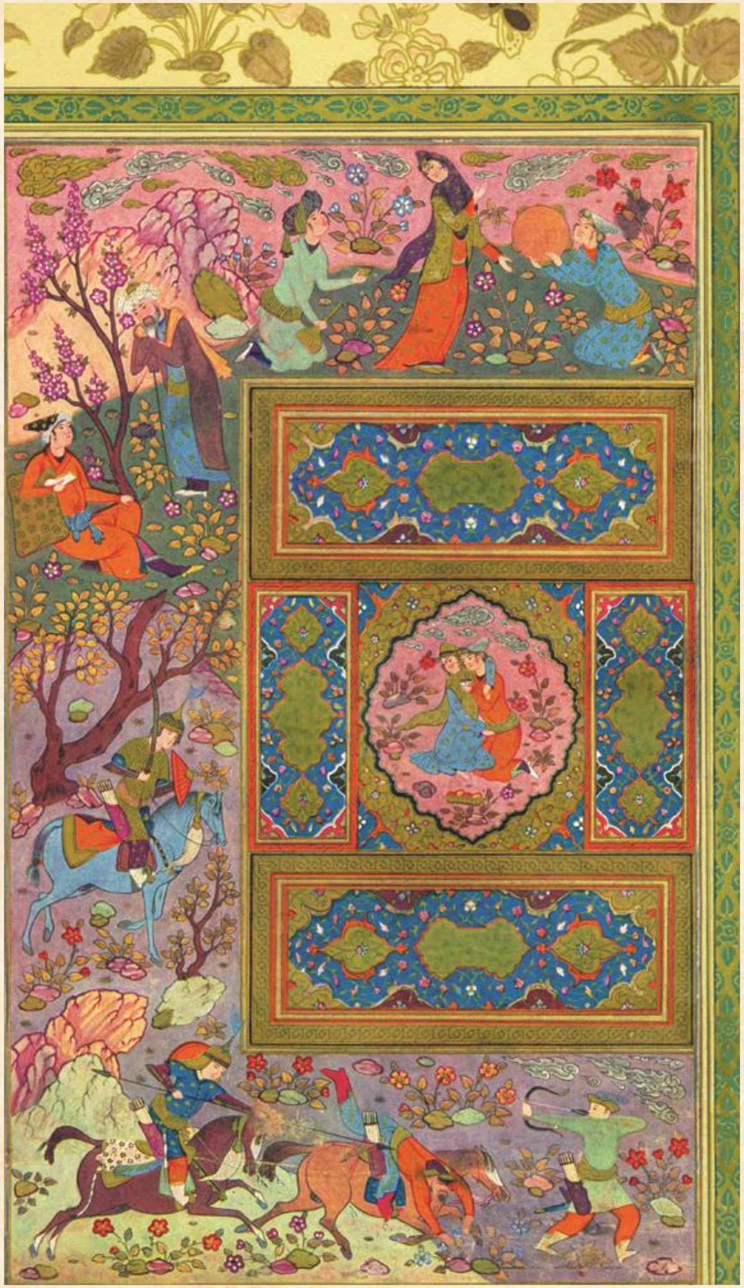
sapiential choice of the Truth, and in the light of this Truth all must be known and evaluated. In metaphysical truth there is neither here-below nor hereafter, everything is contained in it, and this can be seen in Islamic art. Everything natural to man finds its place in this truth. The world is seen in God, and thus is given its meaning and spiritual efficacy.

It is understandable that the smiling grace of Islamic architecture should have appeared to many Christians as something worldly and "pagan"; the volitive perspective envisages the "here-below" and the "beyond" only as levels of existence which mark separation and opposition and not as universal essences which unite and make identical. In Renaissance art virtue becomes crushing, lugubrious, and tiresome; beside the Alhambra the palace of Charles V seeks to be grave and austere but only achieves a heaviness and opacity which banish all higher intelligence, contemplation, and serenity.

"… After looking at the Alhambra for hours, it became clearer than ever to me that Islamic art is contemplative, whereas Gothic art is volitive, not to speak of the Renaissance, in which the volitive becomes worldly, hypocritical, sensual, and ostentatious. For Charles V the Alhambra was worldly because it is beautiful and joyful, and to this apparent worldliness he opposed the dull, oppressive, and completely unspiritual ostentatiousness of his



135. The Court of Lions, Alhambra, Granada, 14th century



136. *Firdausi Encounters the Court Poets of Ghazna*, page from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāmeh* (Book of Kings), Tabriz, Iran, c. 1532

137. Page from a Persian manuscript, late 16th century

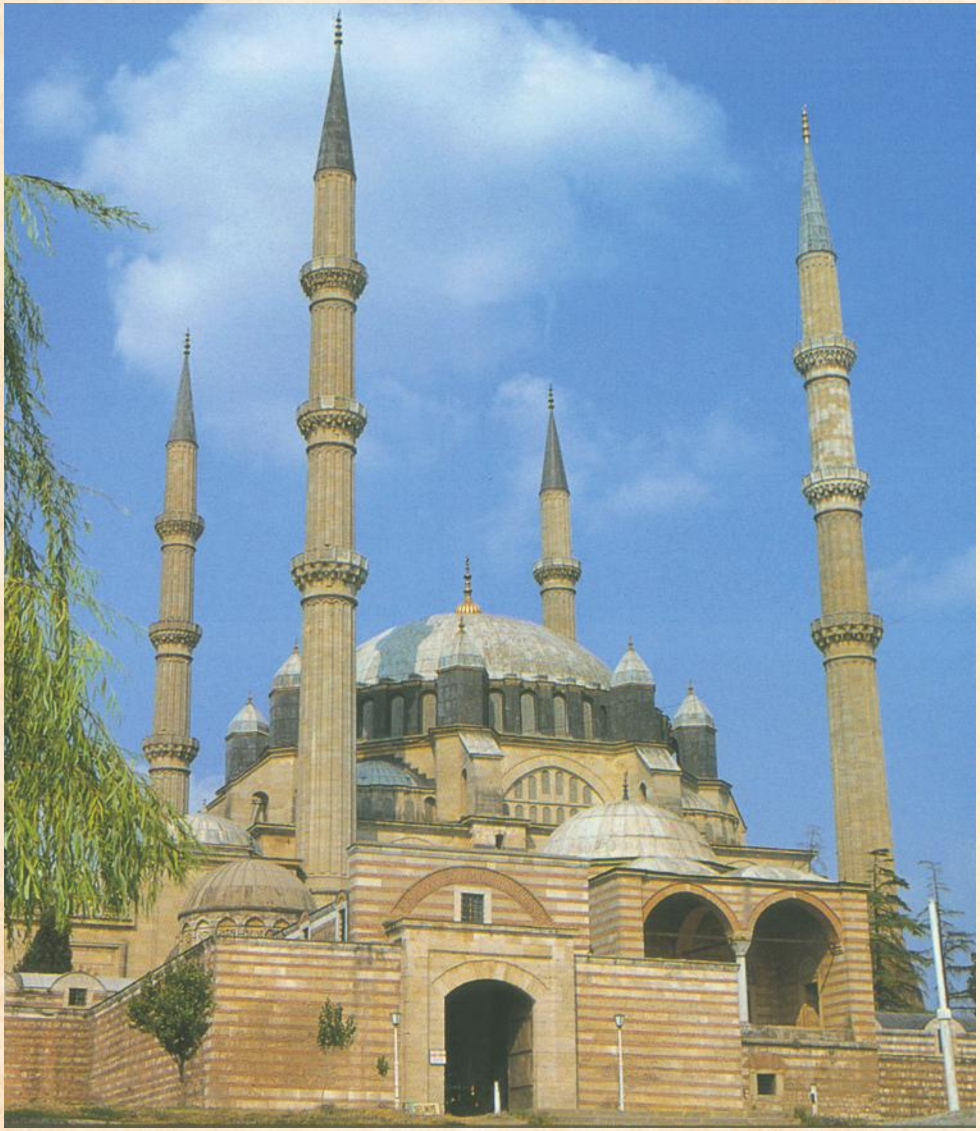
palace. Here ugliness and stupidity wish to pass themselves off as virtues, namely seriousness, strength, and otherworldliness. The otherworldly is seen purely in 'volitive' fashion, as something negative, and not as something spiritual which reveals itself in creation.

"After the Alhambra and the Alcázar of Seville I have never seen anything which appeased my spirit more than the Mosque at Córdoba, and seldom seen anything which so aroused my indignation as the Christian addition in this mosque; the Catholicism of the Renaissance shows itself here in its most horrible form—a proof that exotericism is aware of only a fraction of the devil's power, and indeed beyond certain limits allows it free play: to be precise, in those realms which concern the Intellect. There is only one ancient and beautiful Madonna there, and one other good old picture. But enough said..." [from a letter to Titus Burckhardt, August 1954].

Muslim art shows in a very transparent way how art should repeat nature—understood in the widest possible sense—in its creative modes without copying it in its results. It is abstract, but also poetical and gracious; it is woven out of sobriety and splendor. The style of the Maghrib is perhaps more virile than are the Turkish and Persian styles; but these—and especially the latter—are by way of compensation more varied.[3]

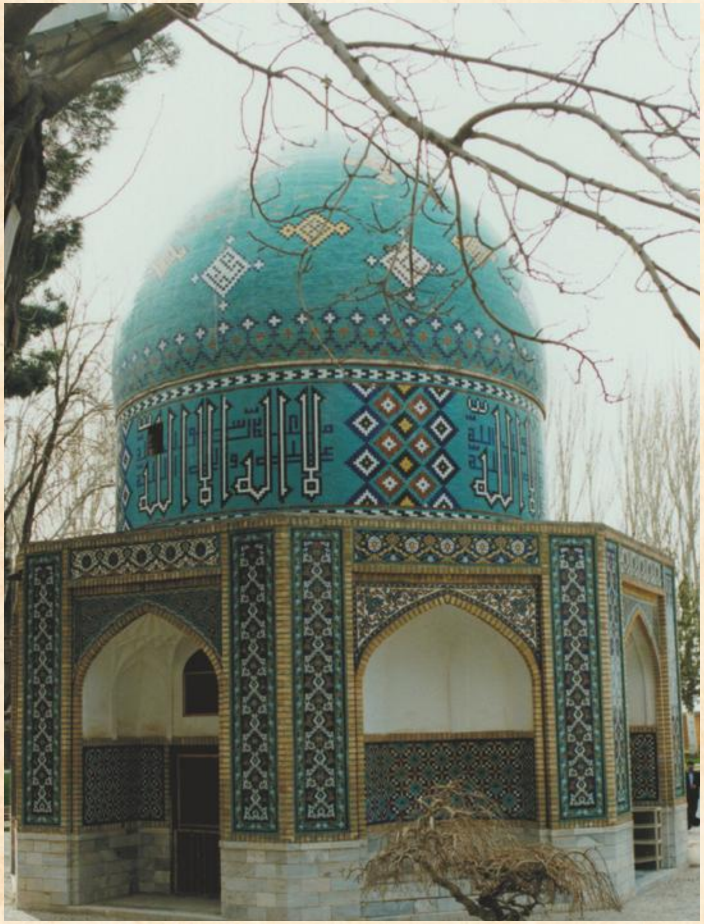
138. *The Ascension* (*Miraj*) *of the Prophet*, from a manuscript of Nizami, 17th century

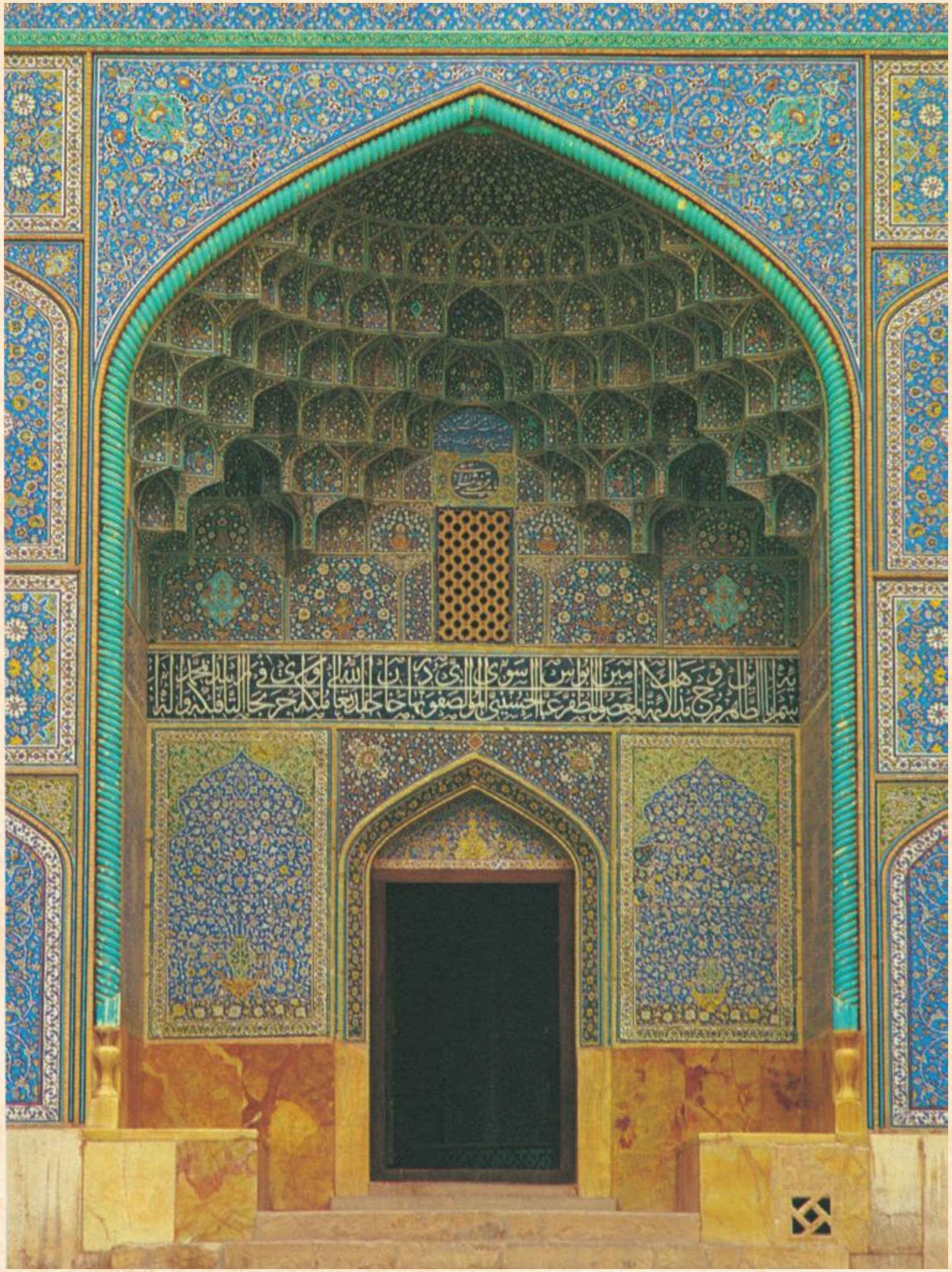
[3] Persian miniatures integrate things in a surface without perspective, and thus in a sense without limits, like a piece of weaving, and it is this which makes them compatible—at any rate as "worldly" objects—with the Islamic perspective. In a general way Muslims distrust any "materialization" of religious subjects as if in fear that spiritual realities might become exhausted through an excess of sensory crystallization. The sculptured and dramatic imagery of the Roman Church has indeed proven to be a two-edged sword; instead of making it "appreciable" and popular, the Church ought to have maintained in it the hieratic abstraction of Romanesque statuary. It is not the sole obligation of art to come down towards the common people; it should also remain faithful to its intrinsic truth in order to allow men to rise towards that truth.



The spiritual intention of Islam is brought clearly to view in its art: just as its art captures the all-pervading and the all-inclusive, and avoids narrowness of every kind, so Islam itself seeks to avoid whatever is ugly, and to keep in sight that which is "everywhere Center." For this reason it replaces, so to speak, the "cross" by the "weave." A center which is a center only at a definite point, it rejects as "association"; it wishes to dissolve *a priori* every individualistic entanglement; it knows only one Center: God. Every other "center," such as the Prophet, or Islam itself, is loosened in a rhythm or in a "weaving." The Kaabah too is in its center a world-containing web.

139. Selimiye Mosque, Edirne, Turkey, 16th century
140. *Ayat al-Kursī* (the Throne verse), Koran 2: 255, Turkish calligraphy





141. Mausoleum of Farid ad-Din Attar, Neishabour, Iran
142. Entrance to the Shaykh Lutfallah Mosque, Isfahan, 12th century

143. Parvati, Chola Dynasty, 10th century; **144**. Shiva Nataraja, Tamil Nadu, late 12th century; **145**. Parvati, South India, Chola period, mid 10th century

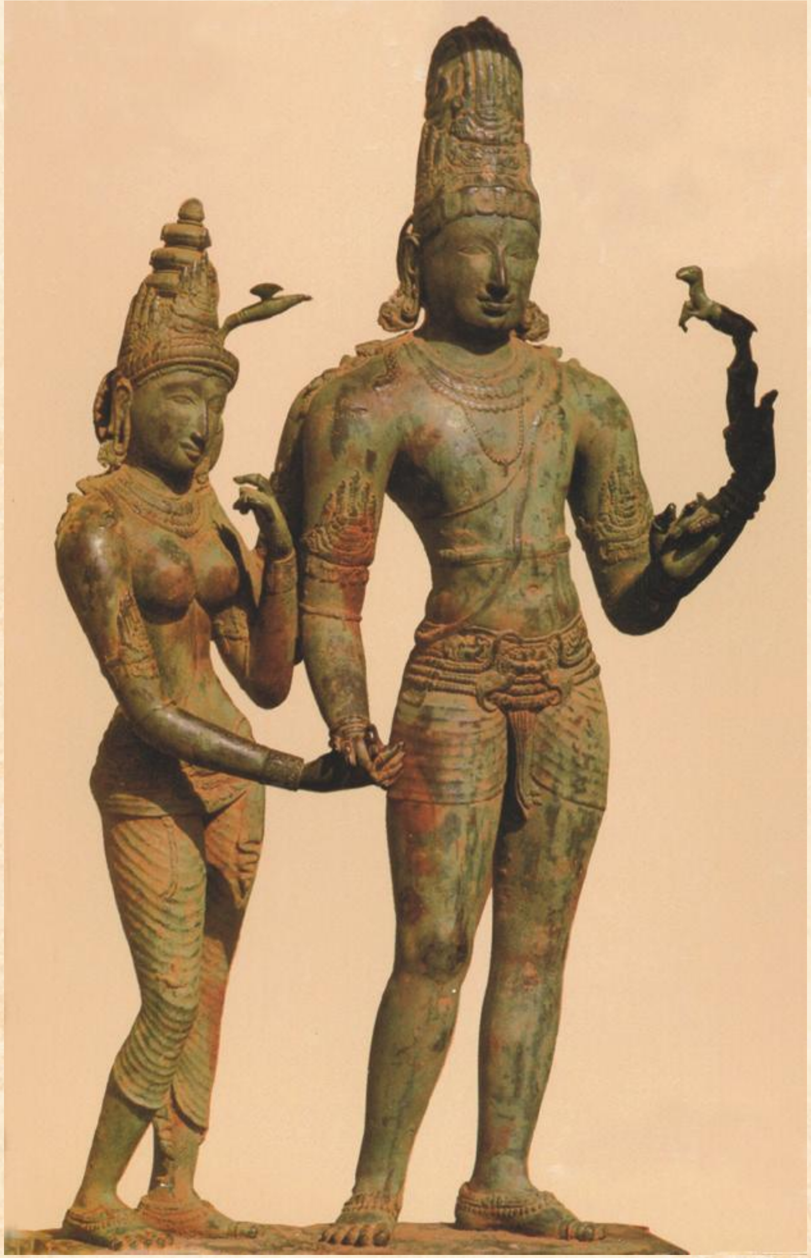
Hindu Art

Starting from the idea that form is in a way necessarily opposed to essence, the latter being universal inwardness and the former "accidental" outwardness, we can explain certain deformations practiced in sacred art as a reduction to the essence or as a "scorching by the essence," so to speak. The essence will then appear as an inner fire which disfigures, or as an "abyss" in which proportions are shattered, so that what is sacred and "formless" (in the spiritual, not in the chaotic sense) is like an irruption of essence into form.

Again, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the human spirit cannot be simultaneously deployed in all directions. Since traditional symbolism by no means implies by definition an observation of physical forms carried to extreme lengths, there is no reason for a sacerdotal art to tend towards such observation; it will be content with what the natural genius of the race requires, and this explains that mixture of "deforming" symbolism and refined observation which characterizes sacred art in general. At times the qualitative aspect does violence to the quantitative reality: Hindu art marks femininity by the breasts and hips and gives them the importance of ideograms; it transforms into symbols characteristics which would otherwise simply be accepted as natural facts, and this is related to the "deforming essence" mentioned above.

In classical Greece, the sense of clarity, of measure, of finite perfection, completely obliterated the sense of the transcendent, of mystery, and of the infinite. Sensible beauty became an end in itself; it was no longer man who resembled God, it was God who resembled man [see ill. 146]; whereas in Egyptian and Hindu art, which express the substantial and not the accidental, one feels that the human form is nothing without a mystery which on the one hand fashions it and on the other hand transcends it, and which calls both to Love and to Deliverance.

146. *Coryphorus*, Roman copy of the bronze by Polyclitus, c. 440 B.C.
147. Triad of Mycerinus, Egypt, c. 2520 B.C.



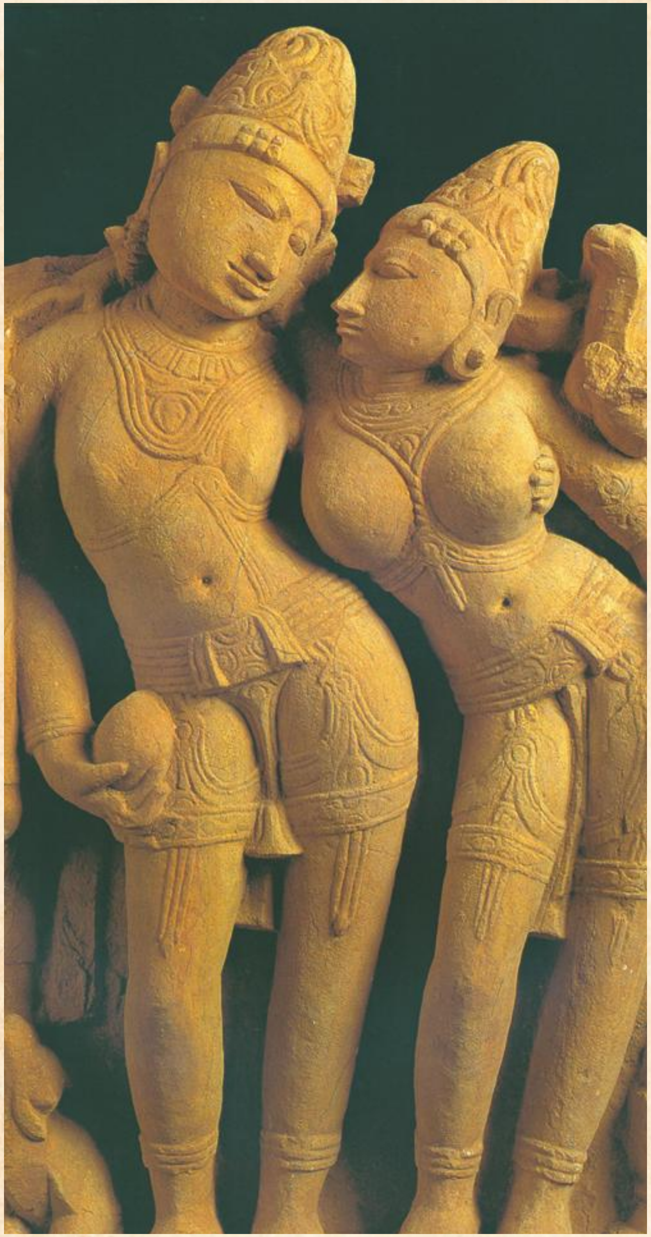
148. Shiva and Parvati, Tamil Nadu, India, 11th century
149. Standing Vishnu, Chola Dynasty, South India, 10th century

The sacred and the sacral mentality is manifested in Hinduism most characteristically by the ritual gestures of the hands, the *mudra*s, which are found in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism as well; for the Hindus, there is also an essentializing relationship between the sacred and nudity, which Buddhism did not retain except for the images of celestial beings.

Of Hindu figurative art it can be said that it is derived from the postures and gestures of *yoga* and of the mythological dance. Dancing, the divine art of Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance, was revealed to the sage Bharatamuni by Shiva and his spouse Parvati themselves and was codified by the sage in the *Bhārata Nātya Shāstra.* Hindu music, closely connected as it is with dancing, is founded on the *Sāma Veda*, its rhythms being derived from the Sanskrit meters. It is dancing which provides the determining note of the whole of Hindu art: sacred images translate this figurative mythology—or figurative metaphysic—into the language of inert matter.[1] Let us add that this art is neither

[1] "Without knowledge of the science of dancing it is hard to understand the rules of painting" (*Vishnu Dharma Uttara*). "Only those sculptures or paintings should be judged beautiful which conform to canonical prescriptions, not those which please a personal taste of fantasy" (Shukracharya). "The particular form suitable to each image is described in the *Shilpa Shāstras*, the canonical texts followed by the image-makers." These texts supply the data needed for the mental representation which serves as the sculptor's model. According to his vision, says Shukracharya, he will fashion

150. Mukteshvara Temple, Bhuvanesvar, India, 9th-10th century



151. Shiva and Parvati, India, 11th-12th century

moral nor immoral, for the Hindu sees in sexual matters their essential cosmic or divine aspect and not their accidental physical aspect.[2] Hindu architecture also has a foundation in the Scriptures, which describe its celestial origin; its profound connection with Hindu dancing results from the form of the Vedic sacrifice.[3] The whole of Hindu architecture is essentially a coordination of the circle and the square in accord with the Vedic fire altar, Agni; in other words the architecture is derived from the primordial altar.[4]

There is something vegetative, and thus alive, about the Hindu temple because of this sort of spiritualized sensuality characterizing the Hindu soul—a sensuality always close to asceticism and death and opening on to the Infinite.

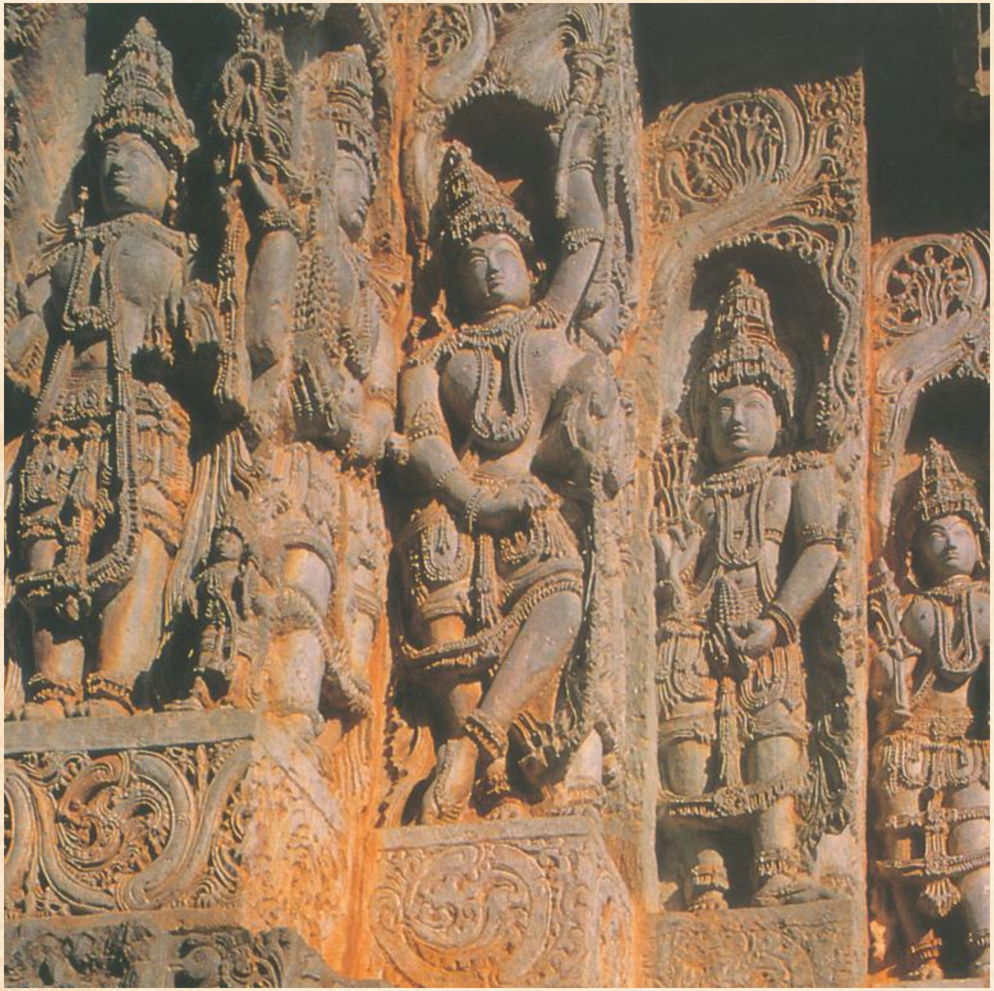
Hindu art has in both architecture and sculpture something of the heavy motion of the sea and at the same time something of the exuberance of virgin forest; it is sumptuous, sensual, and rhythmical; intimately linked with dancing, it seems to originate in the cosmic dance of the Gods.

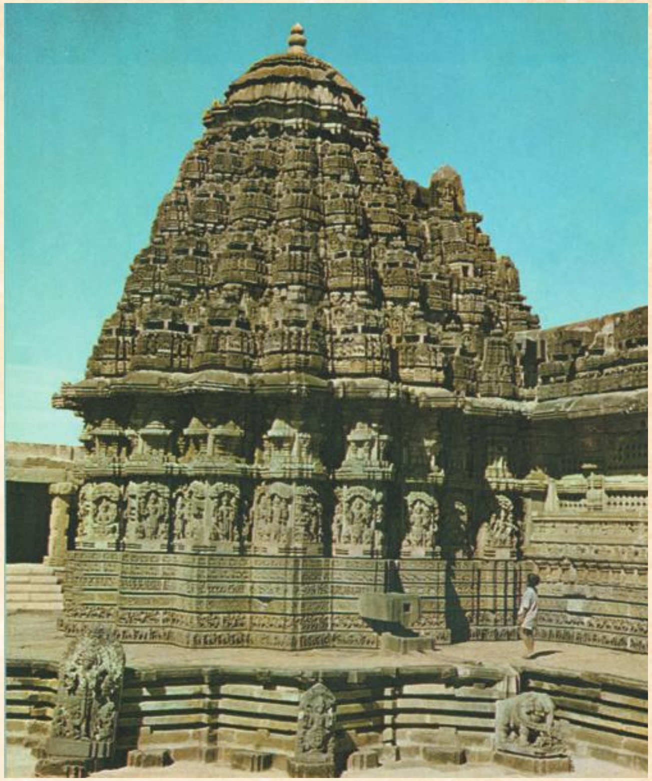
in temples the image of the divinities he adores. It is thus, and not by some other means, in truth and not by direct observation, that he will be able to attain his goal.

[2] The average Westerner is always ready to reproach Hindus for what he believes to be "impurity"; for a true Hindu it is this very reproach that shows an impure attitude.

[3] "It is hardly necessary to point out that the Vedic sacrifice, which is always described as the imitation of 'what was at the beginning,' is, in all its forms and in the full meaning of the terms, a work of art and at the same time a synthesis of the arts of liturgy and architecture, and one can say the same of the Christian Mass (which is also a sacrifice in mime) where the dramatic and architectural elements are inseparably united" (Ananda Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of 'Folklore' and 'Popular Art,'" in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*)

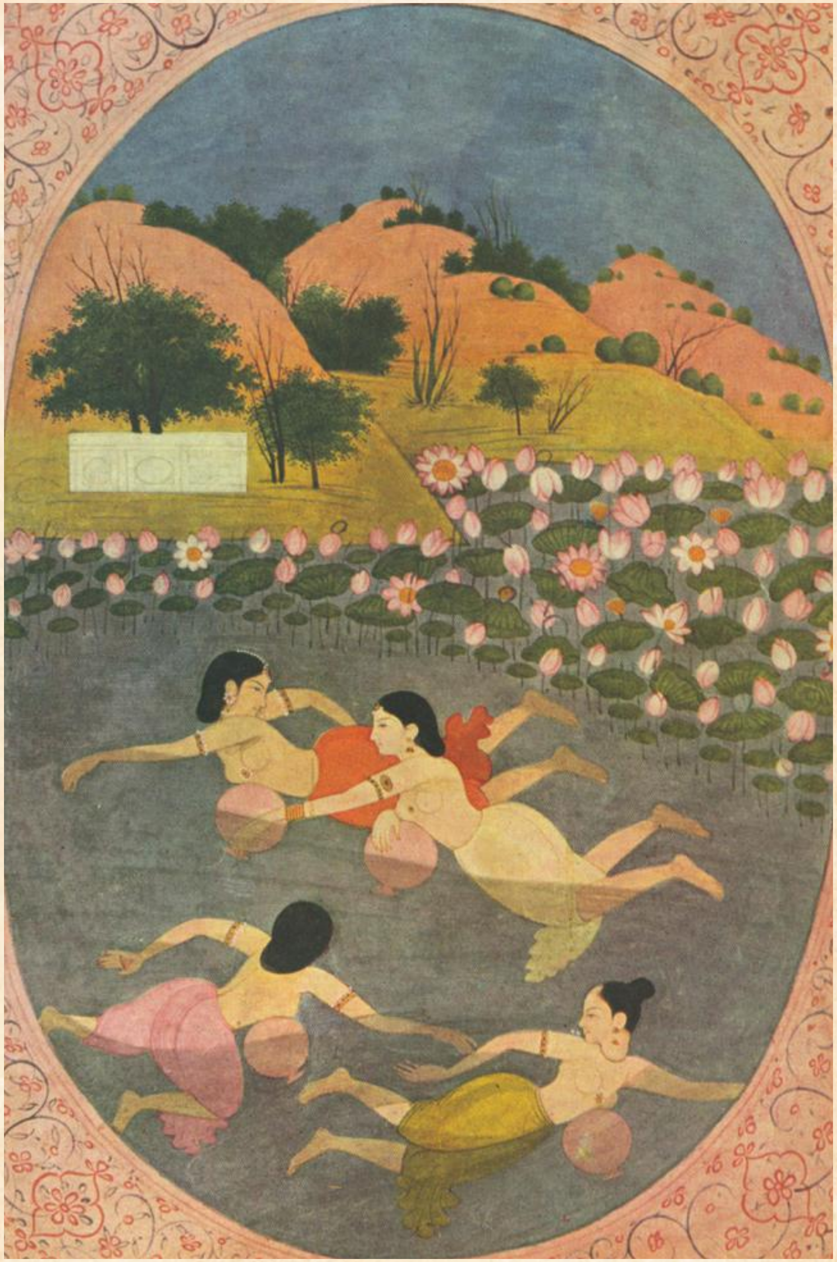
[4] Hindu cosmology concerning the cardinal points and architecture coincides remarkably with that of the North American Indians, and also to some extent with that of the peoples of Siberia, so that it is easy to see in this fact a same heritage from the Hyperborean tradition. The circle appears again in the form of the Red Indian's camp surrounding the central fire, as also in the form of their tents or huts, while the symbolism of the square is actualized in the rite of the Sacred Pipe.



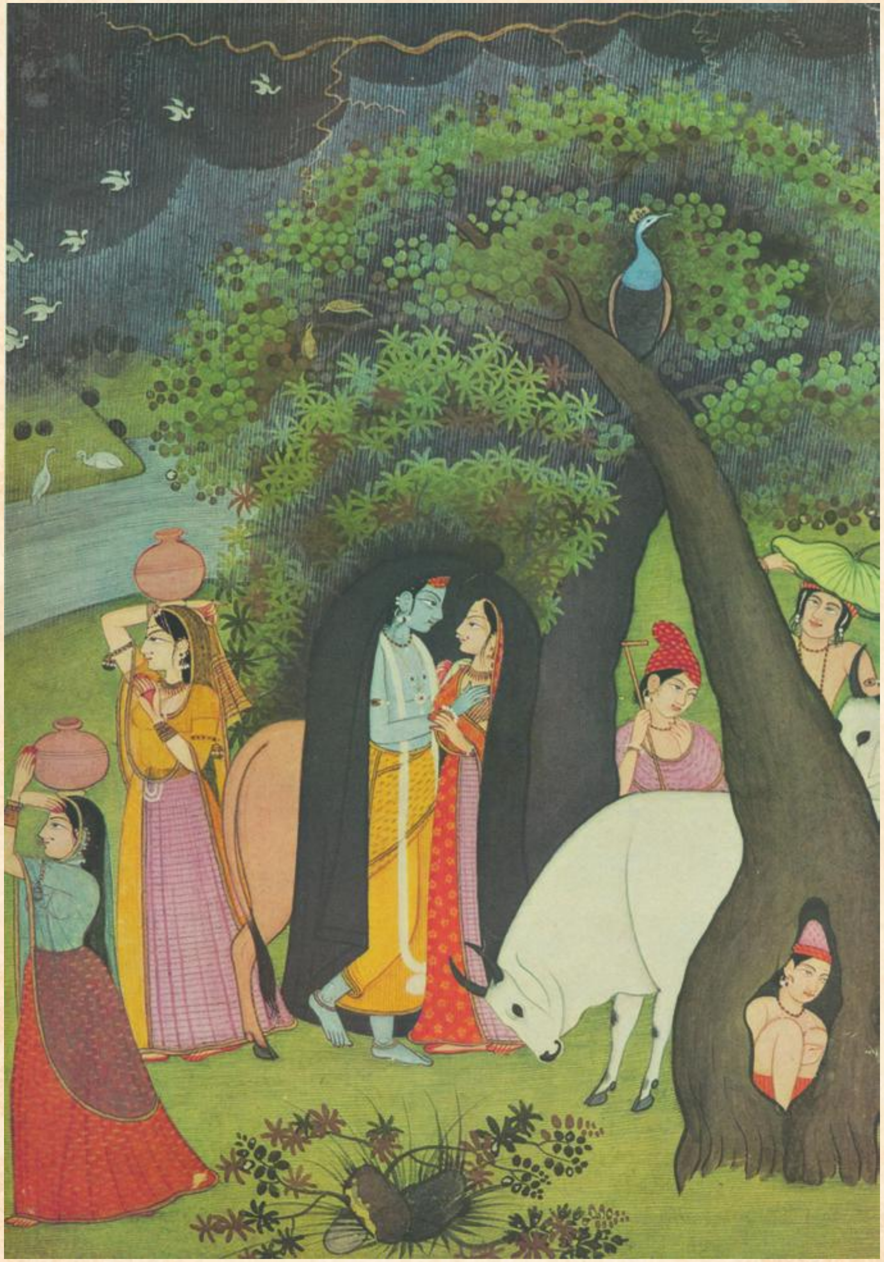


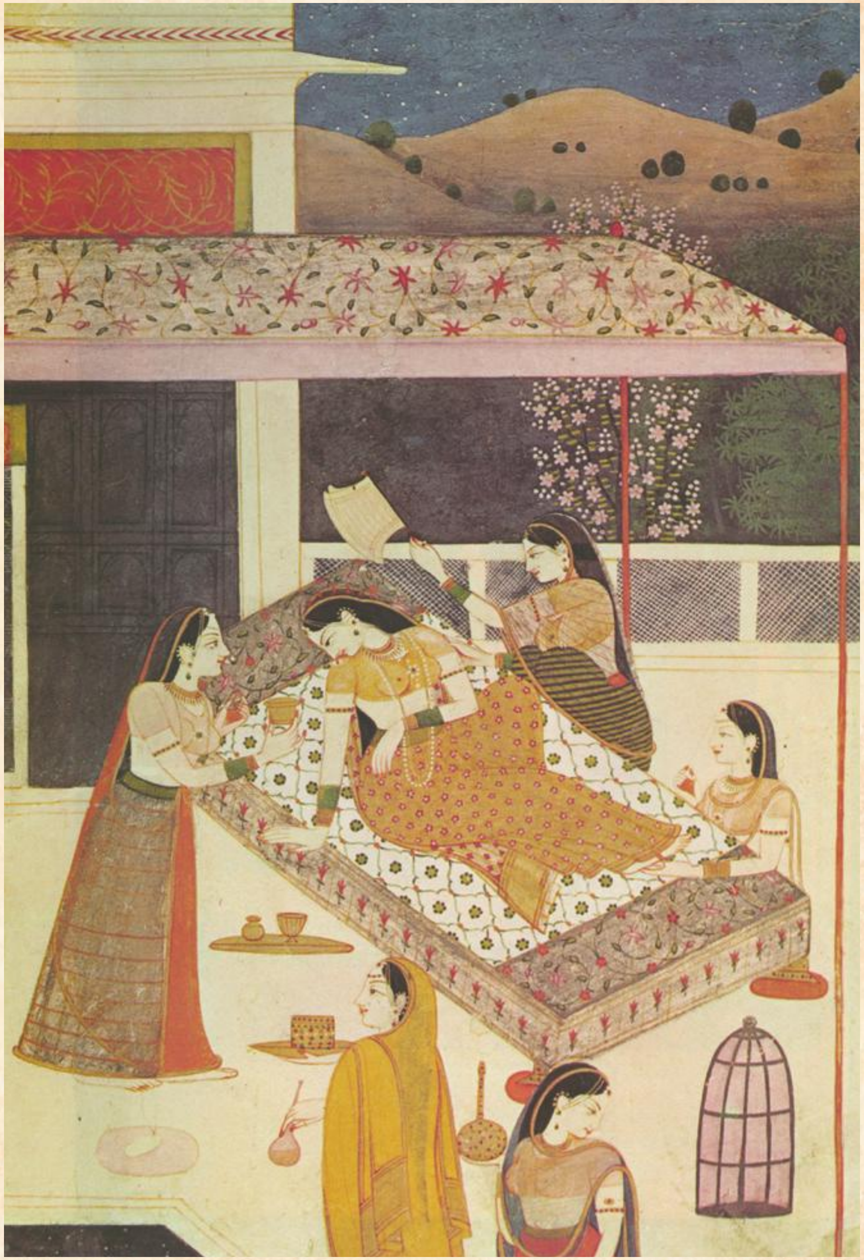
The Hindu, or more particularly the Vishnuite miniature, is one of the most perfect extra-liturgical arts there is, and we do not hesitate to say that some of its productions are at the summit of all painting. Descended from the sacred painting of which the Ajanta frescoes afford us a final trace, the Hindu miniature has undergone Persian influences, but it remains essentially Hindu

152-153. Chenakesvar Temple, Belur, India, 12th century

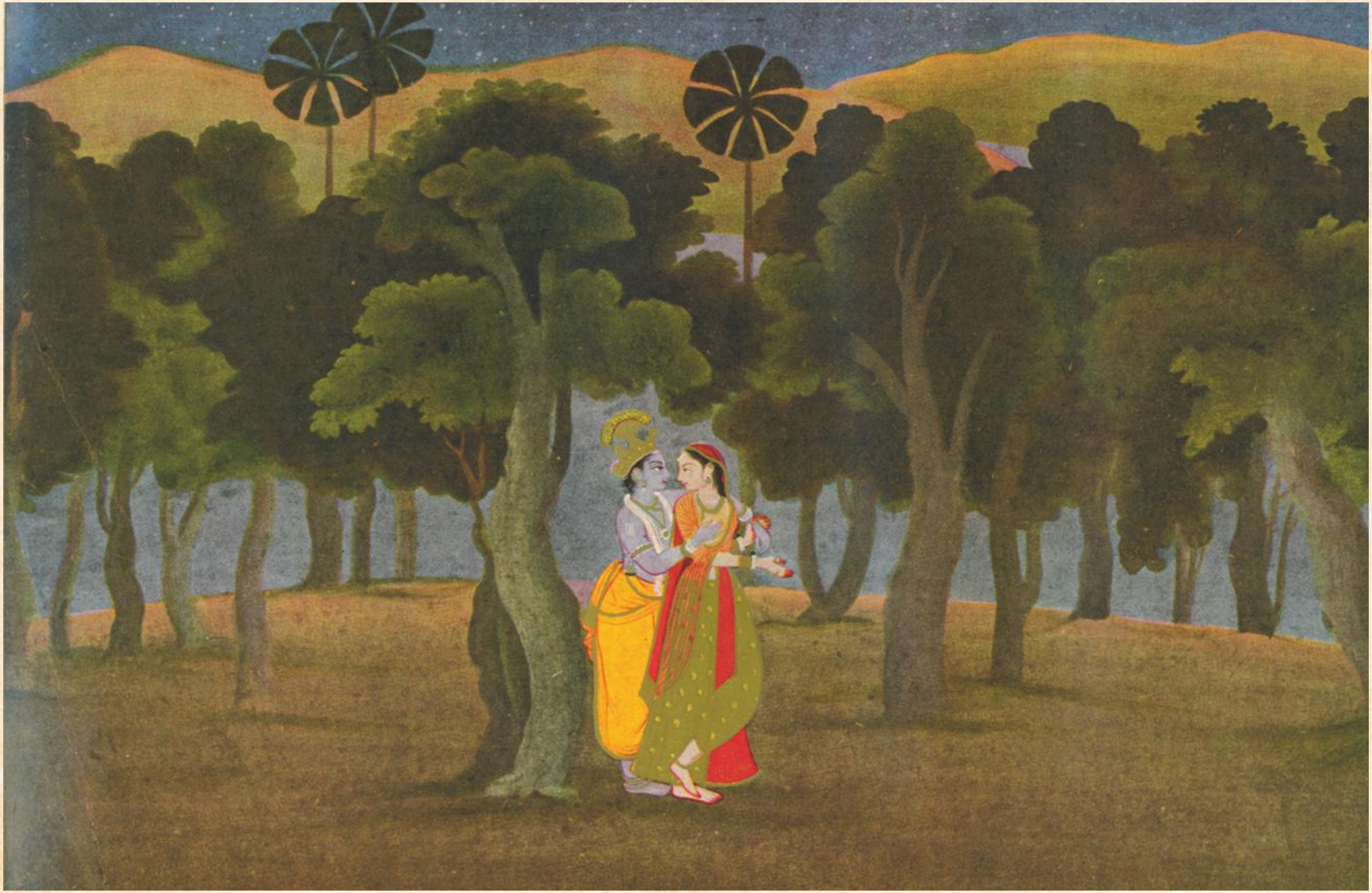


154. *Lovers in a Moonlit Retreat*, School of Garhwal, c. 1780
155. *Girls Swimming*, illustration to the Indian musical mode *Sindhuri Ragini*, School of Garhwal, c. 1790





156. *Sheltering from Rain*, School of Kangra, c. 1800
157. *Queen Awaiting Her Lover*, School of Garhwal, c. 1785



158. *Thus Arose the Love of Radha and Krishna*, miniature from the *Gītā Govinda*, Kangra, 18th century

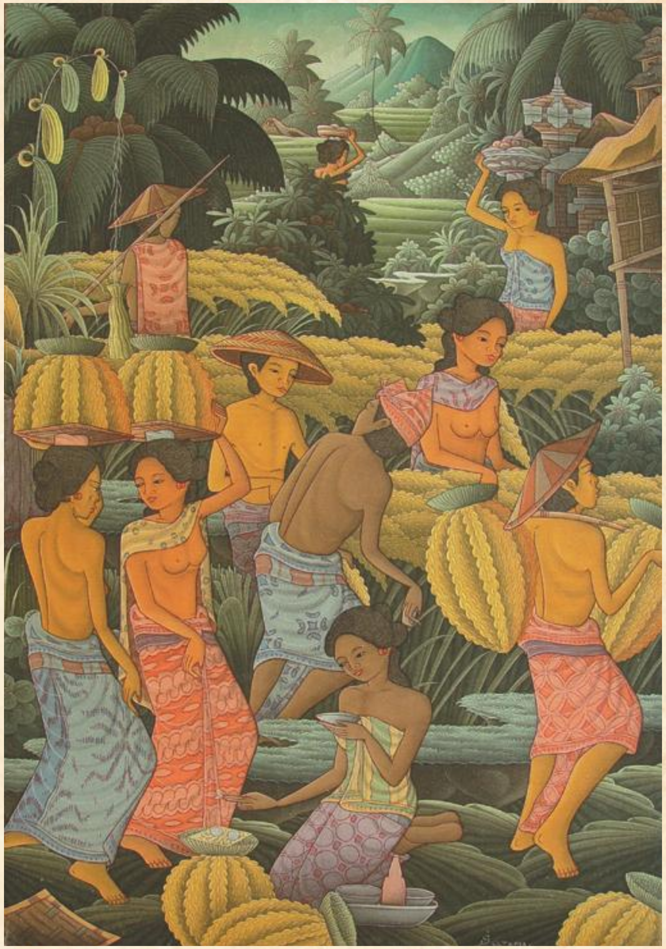
and is in no wise syncretistic;[5] it has in any event achieved a nobility of draughtsmanship, of coloring, and of stylization in general, and over and above this, a climate of candor and holiness, which are unsurpassable and which, in the best of its examples, transport the viewer into an almost paradisiac atmosphere, a sort of earthly prolongation of heavenly childhood.

The Hindu miniature, whether centered on Krishna or on Rama, renders visible those spiritual gardens which are the *Mahābhārata,* the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, and the *Rāmāyana*, but it also conveys musical motifs with rich inventiveness, as well as the contradictory sentiments to which love may give rise in diverse situations; most of these subjects hold us, willingly or not, under the spell of Krishna's flute. Some of these paintings, in which a maximum of rigor and musicality is combined with a vivid spiritual expressiveness, unquestionably pertain to sacred art.[6]

[5] Whether it be a case of art, doctrine, or anything else, there is syncretism when there is an assemblage of disparate elements, but not when there is a unity which has assimilated elements of diverse provenance.

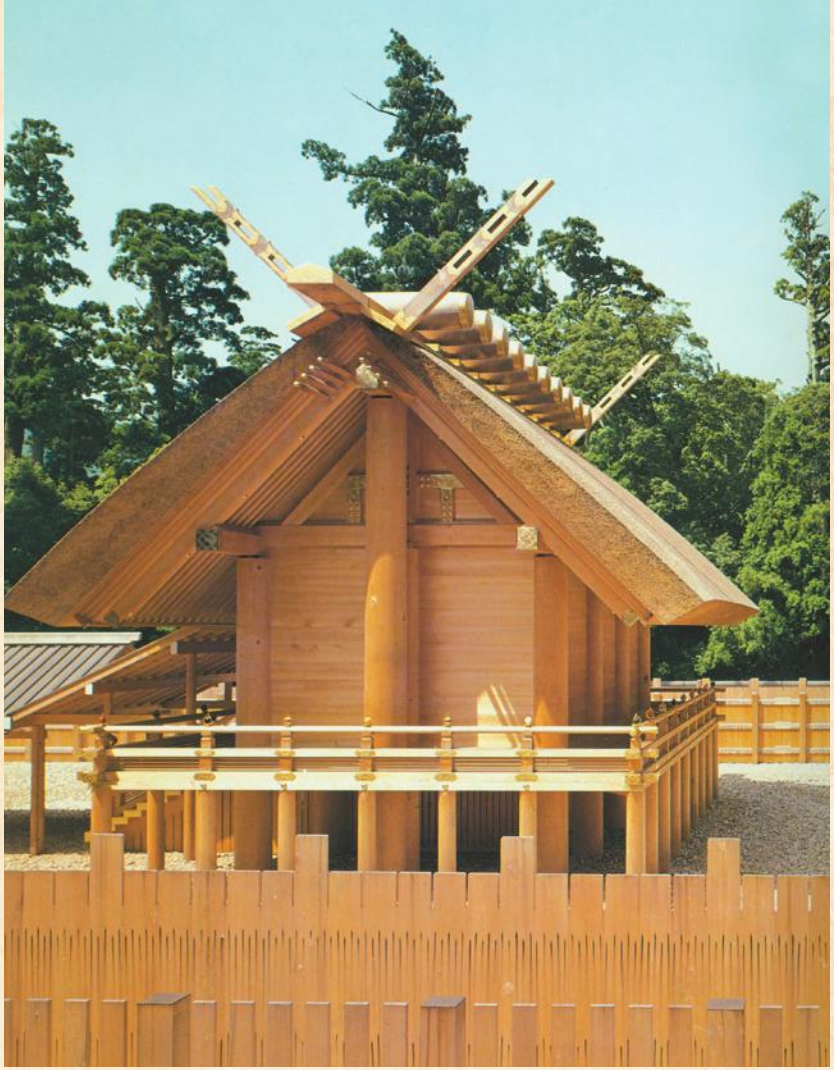
[6] All these remarks likewise apply to that other summit of painting attained in the Japanese screen; apart from the fact that this genre, in many of its productions, consciously prolongs the Zen or more or less Taoist painting of the kakemonos, with its content of landscape or plants, as well as other subjects which do not have to be taken into consideration here, it often attains a degree of perfection and profundity which renders it inseparable from Buddhist or Shintoist contemplativity.

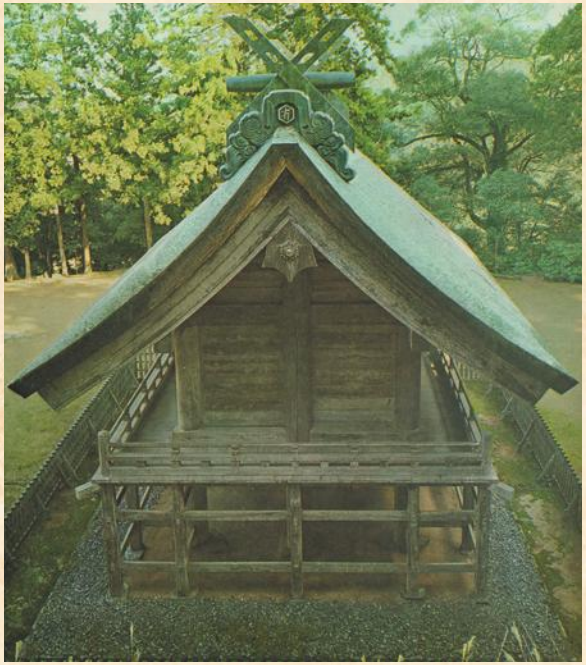
159. *Bodhisattva* Padmapani, "the Bearer of the Lotus," Ajanta Caves, 6th century



Another type of extra-liturgical art that captivates by its powerful and candid originality is Balinese art, in which Hindu motifs combine with forms proper to the Malay genius; the fact that this genius—apart from the Hindu influence—has expressed itself principally in the sphere of craftsmanship and in that of architecture in wood, bamboo, and straw, does not prevent one from seeing in it qualities which sometimes become great art; there can be no doubt that from the point of view of intrinsic values, and not merely from that of a particular taste, a fine barn in Borneo or Sumatra has much more to offer than has the plaster-nightmare of a baroque church. One can say the same of Shinto sanctuaries, which have been described as "barns," especially those at Ise.

160. Screen with plum tree, Japan, 18th century; **161**. Screen with gingko tree, Japan, early Edo period, 17th century; **162**. Contemporary Balinese painting



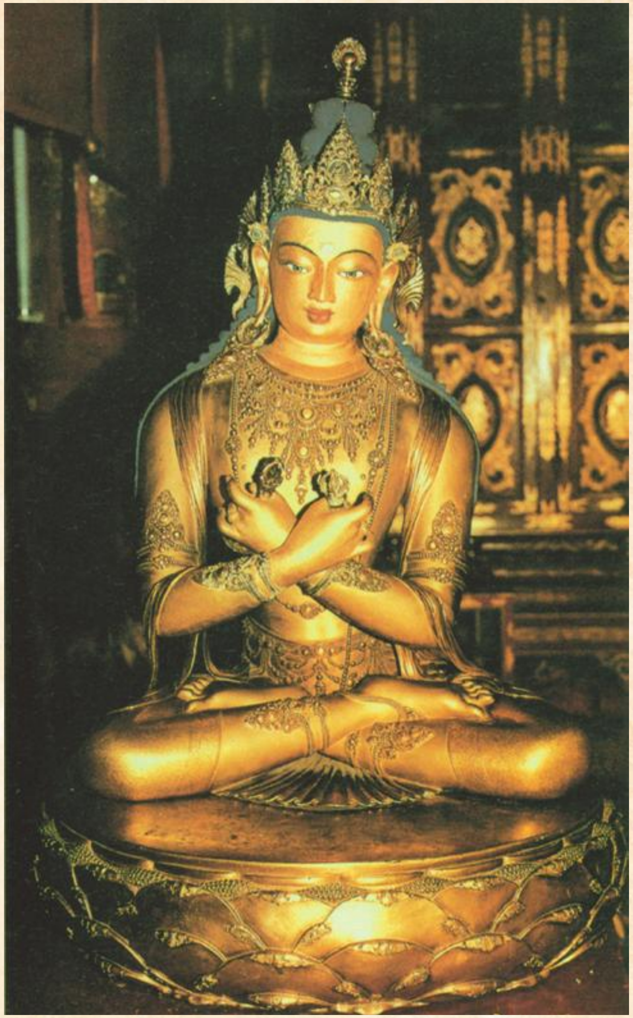


Top left: **163**. Rice barns, Pariangan, West Sumatra; *Right*: **164**. Main sanctuary of Inner Shrine, Ise Jingu, Uji-Yamada, Japan, rebuilding of 1973. *Bottom left*: **165**. Kamosu Shrine, Shimane Prefecture, Japan, 1346

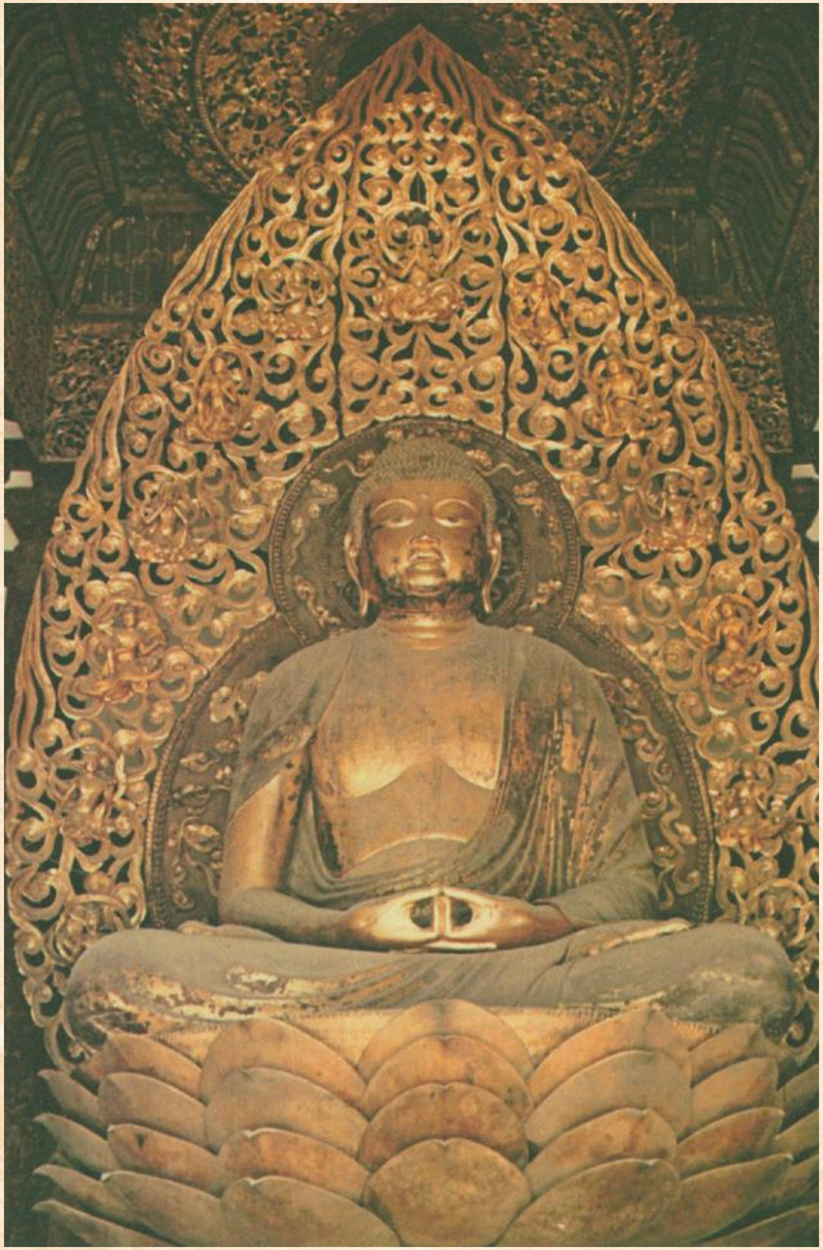
166. Seishi *Bosatsu*, Nara period, Japan, 7th century; **167**. Amida Buddha, Kamakura period, Kotoku-in, Japan, mid 13th century; **168**. Kwannon, Nara period, Japan, late 7th century

Buddhist Art

The Buddhist conception of art is, at least in certain respects, not remote from the Christian: like Christian art, Buddhist art is centered on the image of the Superman, bearer of the Revelation, though it differs from the Christian perspective in its non-theism, which brings everything back to the impersonal; if man is logically at the center of the cosmos, this is, for Buddhism, "by accident" and not from theological necessity as in the case of Christianity; persons are "ideas" rather than individuals. Buddhist art evolves round the sacramental image of the Buddha, given, according to one tradition, in the lifetime of the Blessed One in different forms, both sculptural and pictorial. The situation is the opposite of that of Christian art, for in Buddhism statuary is more important than painting, although the latter is nonetheless strictly canonical and not "discretionary" like Christian statuary. In the realm of architecture, we may mention the *stūpa* of Piprava built immediately after the death of Shakyamuni; apart from this, elements of Hindu and Chinese art were transmuted into a new art of which there were a number of variants both in the *Theravāda* and the *Mahāyāna* schools. From a doctrinal point of view this art is founded on the idea of the saving virtue emanating from the superhuman beauty of the Buddhas: the images of the Blessed One, of other Buddhas and of *Bodhisattva*s are sacramental crystallizations of this virtue, which is also manifested in cult objects, "abstract" as to their form but "concrete" in their nature. This principle furnishes a conclusive argument against profane religious art as practiced in the West, for the celestial beauty of the Man-God extends to the whole of traditional art, whatever the particular style required by a given collectivity; to deny traditional art—and here we have Christianity chiefly in mind—is to deny the saving beauty of the Word made flesh; it is to be ignorant of the fact that in true Christian art there is something of Christ and something of the Virgin. Profane art replaces the soul of the Man-God, or of the deified man, by that of the artist and of his human model.

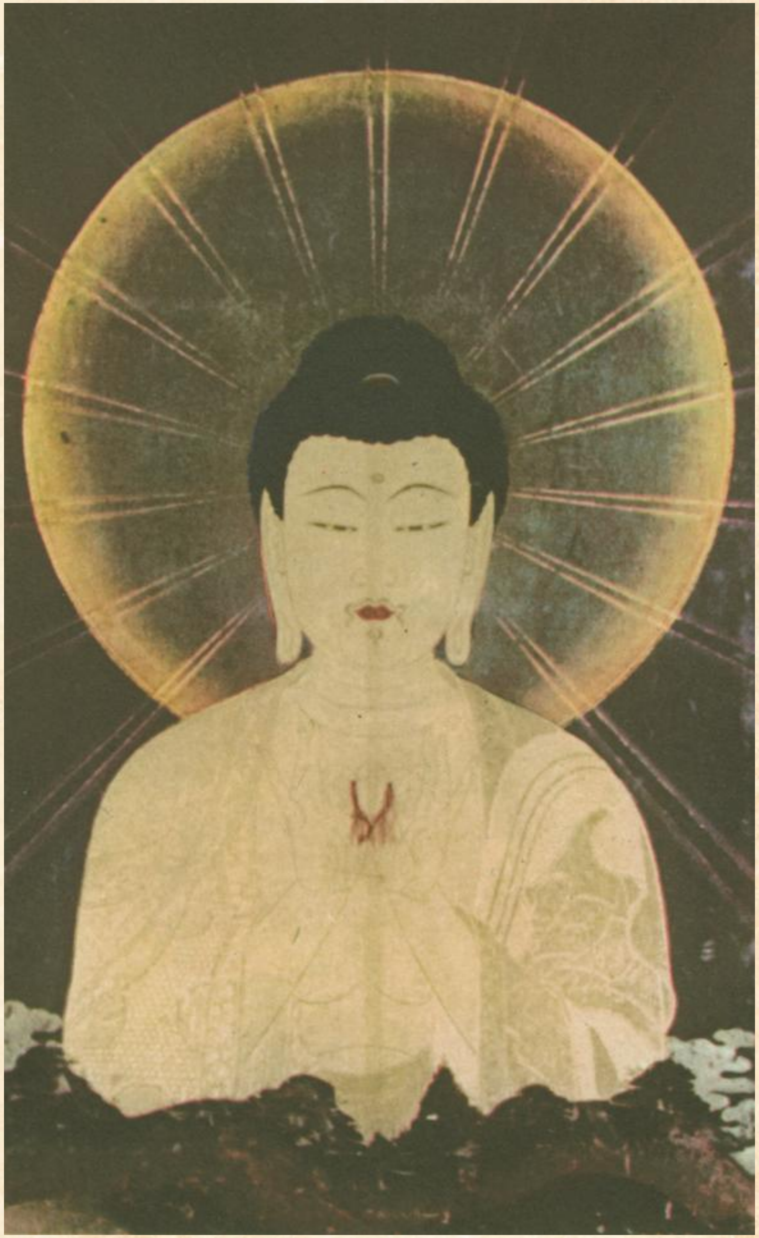


169. Zanabazar, Vajradhara, Gandantegchinlin monastery, Oulan Bator, Mongolia, 17th century



In Buddhism, the sensible sacred has its basis above all in the images—especially the statues—of the Buddha, and by projection, of the *Bodhisattva*s, the *Tārā*s, and other quasi-divine realities; this art attained summits of perfection and interiorizing expressivity with the Tibeto-Mongols on the one hand and the Japanese on the other hand. The extinction of form in the Essence requires as counterpart the manifestation of the Essence in form: whether through the image as in Buddhism, or through the theomorphic human body as in Hinduism, or again through the eucharistic liturgy—including the icon—in Christianity.

170. Jocho, Amida Nyorai, Byodo-in, Kyoto, c. 1053; **171**. Zanabazar, White *Tārā*, Mongolia, 17th century
172. Walking Buddha, Sukhothai, Thailand, 14th century



It could be said that Buddhism extracted from Hinduism its yogic sap, not through a borrowing of course, but through a divinely inspired re-manifestation; it imparted to this substance an expression that was simplified in certain respects, but at the same time fresh and powerfully original. This is demonstrated in a dazzling way by Buddhist art, the prototypes of which are doubtless found in the sacred art of India and in the yogic postures, or again in sacred dance which, for its part, is like an intermediary between *yoga* and temple statuary; Buddhist art—and here one is thinking chiefly of images of the Buddha—seems to have extracted from Hindu art, not such and such a particular symbolism, but

173. *Descent of Jizo*, Kamakura period, Noman-in, Nara, Japan; **174**. Kao, *White-robed Kwannon*, Nanzen-ji, Japan, before 1345; **175**. *Amida Buddha Rising from Behind the Mountains like a Sun of Compassion*, Konkaikomyo-ji, Kyoto, 13th century

176. Amida flanked by Dai-Seishi and Kwannon, Sanzen-in, Kyoto, 1148

its contemplative essence. The plastic arts of India evolve in the last analysis around the human body in its postures of recollection; in Buddhism the image of this body and this visage has become a symbol of extraordinary fecundity and a means of grace of unsurpassable power and nobility;[1] and it is this artistic crystallization that most visibly exteriorizes what Buddhism comprises of absoluteness and therefore also of universality. The sacred image transmits a message of serenity: the Buddhist *Dharma* is not a passionate struggle against passion, it dissolves passion from within, through contemplation. The lotus, supporting the Buddha, is the nature of things, the calm and pure fatality of existence, of its illusion, its disappearance; but it is also the luminous center of *Māyā* whence arises *Nirvāna* become man.

Our first encounter—intense and unforgettable—with Buddhism and the Far East took place in our childhood before a great Japanese Buddha of gilded wood [see ill. 177],[2] flanked by two images of Kwannon.[3] Suddenly faced with

[1] The genius of the yellow race has added to the Hindu prototypes something of a new dimension; new, not from the point of view of symbolism as such, but from that of expression. The image of the Buddha, after going through the Hellenistic aberration of Gandhara—providentially no doubt, for it is a question of the transmission of some secondary formal elements—reached an unheard of expansion among the yellow peoples: it is as if the "soul" of the Divinity, the nirvanic Beatitude, had entered into the symbol. The *Chitralakshana*, an Indo-Tibetan canon of pictorial art, attributes the origin of painting to the Buddha himself; tradition also speaks of a sandalwood statue which King Prasenajit of Shravasti (or Udayana of Kaushambi) had made during the very lifetime of the Buddha, and of which the Greek statues of Gandhara may have been stylized copies.

[2] In an ethnographical museum. Such masterpieces—to say the least—certainly do not belong in a museum of this kind; but what can be said of the thousands of specimens of Buddhist art scattered among and profaned by antique collectors and galleries? There is nothing more arbitrary than the criticism of art with absurd and, in many cases, iconoclastic classifications.

[3] Kwan Yin, in Chinese; Avalokiteshvara, in Sanskrit.

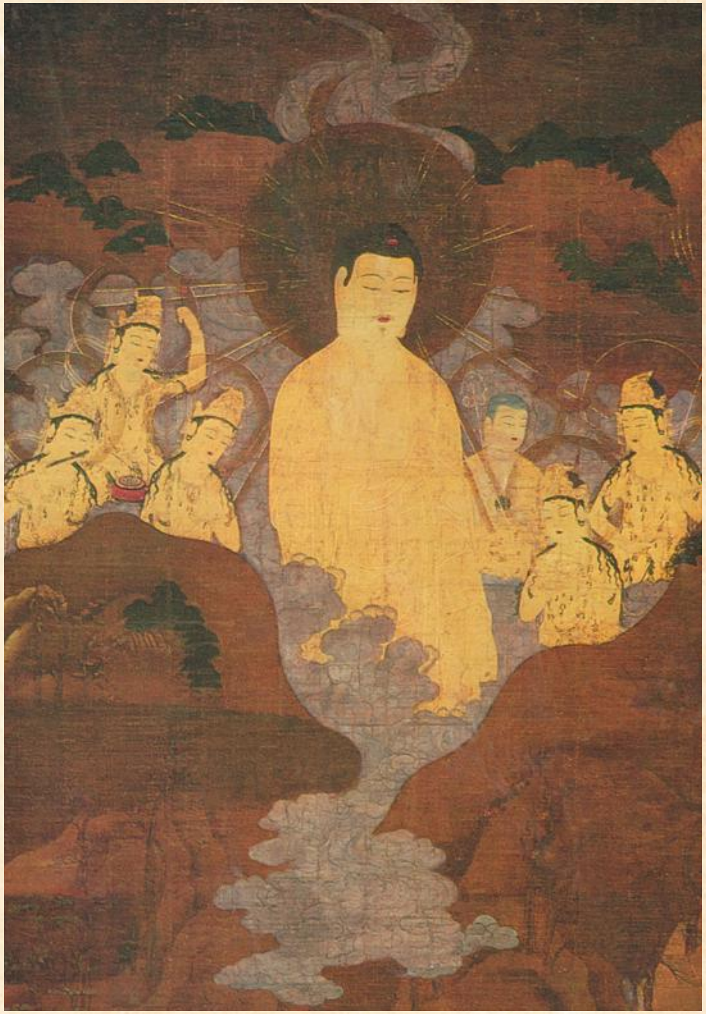
this vision of majesty and mystery, we might well have paraphrased Caesar by exclaiming "*veni, vidi, victus sum*" ("I came, saw, and was conquered"). We mention the above reminiscence because of the light it throws on this overwhelming embodiment of an infinite victory of the Spirit—on this amazing condensation of the Message in the image of the Messenger—represented by the sacramental statue of the Buddha, and represented likewise and by reverberation in the images of *Bodhisattva*s and other spiritual personifications, such as those Kwannons who seem to have emerged from a celestial river of golden light, silence, and mercy.

The canonical figure of the Buddha shows us "That which is" and that which we "should be," or even that which we "are" in our eternal reality: for the visible Buddha is what his invisible essence is, he is in conformity with the nature of things.

He who says peace says beauty; the image of the *Tathāgata*—together with his metaphysical and cosmic derivatives and concomitants—shows that beauty, in its root or essence, is compounded of serenity and mercy; formal harmony appeals to us because it bespeaks profound goodness and inexhaustible wealth, appeasement, and plenitude.

Like a magnet, the beauty of the Buddha draws all the contradictions of the world and transmutes them into radiant silence; beauty is like the sun: it acts without detours, without dialectical intermediaries, its ways are free, direct, incalculable; like love, to which it is closely connected, it can heal, unloose, appease, unite, or deliver through its simple radiance. The image of the Buddha is like a drop of the nectar of immortality fallen into the world of forms and crystallized into a human form, a form accessible to men; or like the sound of that celestial music which could charm a rose tree into flowering amid the snow. Such was Shakyamuni—for it is said that the Buddhas bring salvation not only through their teaching but also through their superhuman

177. Japanese Buddha, Ethnographical Museum, Basle



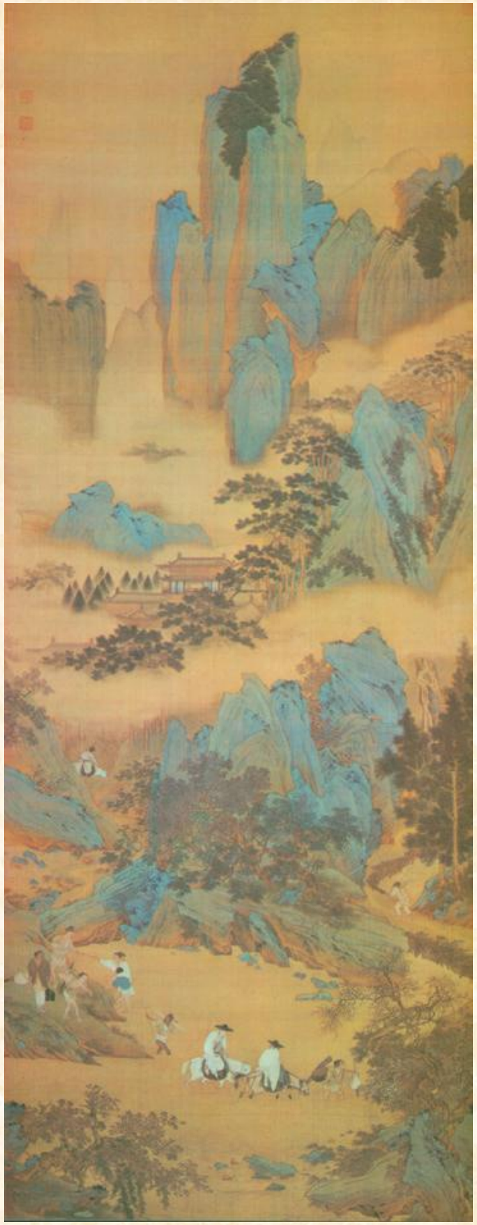
178. *Descent of Amida and His Host in Welcome*, Kamakura period, Chion-in, Kyoto, 14th century
179. *Amitabha Rising over the Mountains*, Kamakura period, 13th century

beauty—and such is his sacramental image. The image of the Messenger is also that of the Message; there is no essential difference between the Buddha, Buddhism, and universal Buddha-nature. Thus, the image indicates the way, or more exactly its goal, or the human setting for that goal, that is, it displays to us that "holy sleep" which is watchfulness and clarity within; by its profound and wondrous presence it suggests "the stilling of mental agitation and the supreme appeasement," to quote the words of Shankara.

The greatest of all miracles is theophany, or to put it in other words, there is in reality only one miracle from which all others derive—and that is the contact between the finite and the Infinite, or the unfolding of the Infinite in the bosom of the finite. The Divine image is a sacramental crystallization of this miraculous meeting, whence its lightning-like evidence, resembling that of the Inward Miracle.*

180. *Avalokiteshvara*, Tibetan *thangka*, early 19th century

* Editor's Note: Meaning, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17: 21).



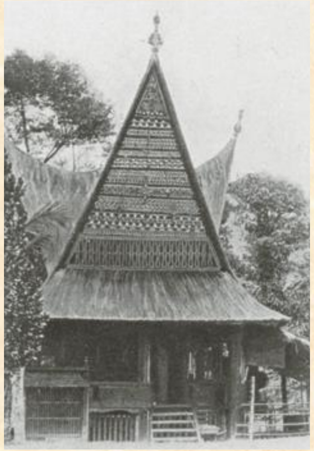
181. Tensho Shubun, *Landscape*, 15th century; **182**. Ch'iu Ying, *Emperor Kuang Wu of the Western Han Dynasty Wading a River*, Ming Dynasty, China
183. Tai Chin, *Returning Late from a Spring Outing*, *15th century*

Far-Eastern Art

The Buddha, we said, is renunciation, peace, mercy, and mystery. Mystery is the essence of truth which cannot be adequately conveyed through language—the vehicle of discursive thought—but which may suddenly be made plain in an illuminating flash through a symbol, such as a key word, a mystic sound, or an image whose suggestive action may be scarcely graspable. This explains the elliptical and paradoxical character of the *koan*s in Zen—verbal symbols calculated to provoke an ontological breach in our carapace of ignorance—and also the mysterious and transparent atmosphere of Taoist and Zen landscapes; the spirit of Zen and that of Taoism meet in this unrivaled art, as well as the ethnic genius of China and Japan. On this plane of visual contemplation—or contemplative vision—the genius of the Chinese and Japanese is one and the same;[1] no peoples have been more successful in visualizing the mystery of things.

In art the white man, or at any rate the Occidental, tends to detach man from nature, even to oppose him to it; the yellow man remains in nature, which he spiritualizes and never destroys, so that the buildings of the yellow people always retain something

[1] Their differences are affirmed on other planes. Compared to the sumptuousness and gaiety of colors used by the Chinese, Japanese art—in the broadest sense—is in general striking through a kind of sobriety and genial simplification, and also by a more accentuated naturism. But these differences are on the whole rather relative. The Tibetan style is midway between that of the Chinese and the Hindus and is heavy, somber, at times rough, and often flamboyant; the Burmese and Siamese style is delicate, lively, and precious.



184. Toba Batak chief's house, Sumatra; **185**. South side of Yushintei, Sento-Gosho (ex-Emperor's Palace), Japan; **186**. Futawarasan shrine, Nikko, Japan

187. Tea Pavilion, Sento-Gosho, Japan; **188**. Chinese vase, c. 1750; **189**. Ritual vessel, mid Chou period, 8th-7th century ; **190**. Wine container, Western Chou Dynasty, mid 11th-early 10th century B.C.

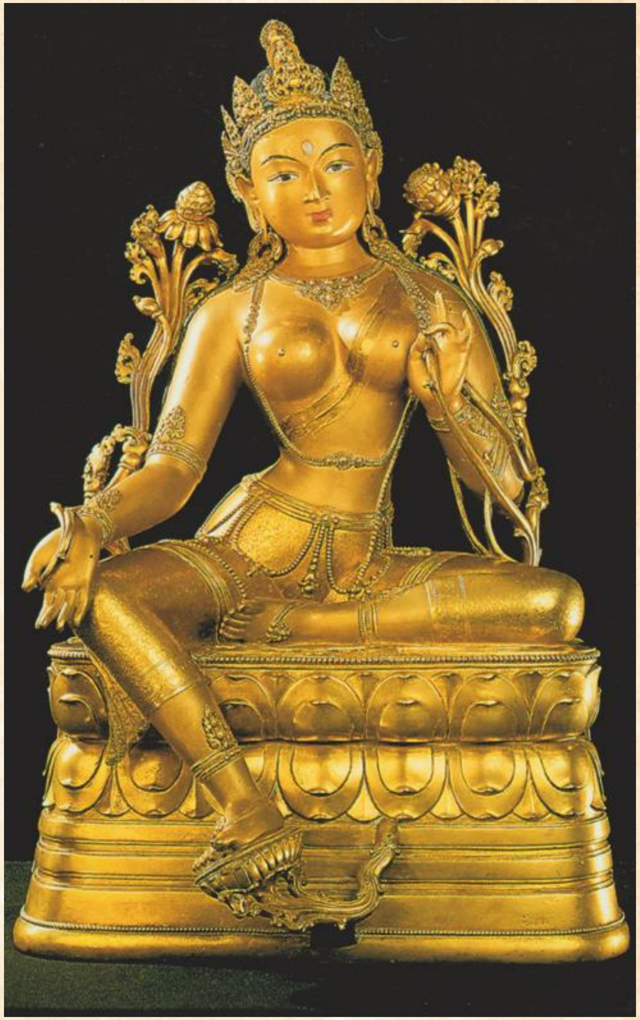
of the spirit of the forest, and this is true even of Hinduized Indo-Chinese with whom a Hindu perspective has become integrated into a Mongolian way of seeing and feeling. In general it can be said that the material civilization of the yellow race remains largely based on the plant kingdom and on an attachment to nature, being associated with wood, bamboo, and pottery rather than with stone, which the yellow man seems in general to distrust as being too dead and ponderous a material.[2] On the other hand, nothing is further from the genius of the yellow race than the muscular and dramatic nudes of the Westerners;[3] the yellow man sees primordial and celestial sublimity, not

[2] The great stone temples of Angkor Wat and Borobudur are Indian monuments executed by yellow men Indianized. Here the pre-Columbian civilizations of America might also be mentioned, though in this case there was, alongside the Mongol element, an Atlantean element perhaps anterior to the great differentiation of races, or connected to the white people by an affinity with the ancient Egyptians and the primitive Berbers. America shows, both racially and culturally, a sort of mixture of Mongolian Siberia and ancient Egypt; hence the Shamanism, the conical tents, the leather robes adorned with fringes, the magical drums, the long hair, the feathers and, in the South, the pyramids, the colossal temples with their static form, the hieroglyphs, and the mummies. Between the three great races of humanity there are doubtless not only types due to admixtures but also, it would seem, types which remained more or less undifferentiated; it can also be supposed that, while primordial humanity did not as yet know different races, it sporadically included highly differentiated types which as it were prefigured the races of today.

[3] There is a narrow-minded classicism which, because it has no objectively valid criterion and is as lacking in imagination as in intelligence and taste, sees in Chinese civilization only pettiness and routine: the Chinese are deemed inferior because they never produced a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare, or because they did not create the Ninth Symphony and so on; now, if there is nothing Promethean in the greatness of the Chinese civilization, that is because it takes its stand on points where the classical prejudice cannot understand it; on the purely artistic level there are ancient bronzes which show more greatness and profundity than the whole of European nineteenth century painting. The first thing to be understood is that there is no true greatness apart from truth, and that truth certainly has no need of grandiloquent expressions. In these days we see a new reaction against classicism in the wider sense, but this reaction, far from being wholesome, on the contrary comes from below, according to the usual rhythm of a certain kind of "evolution."

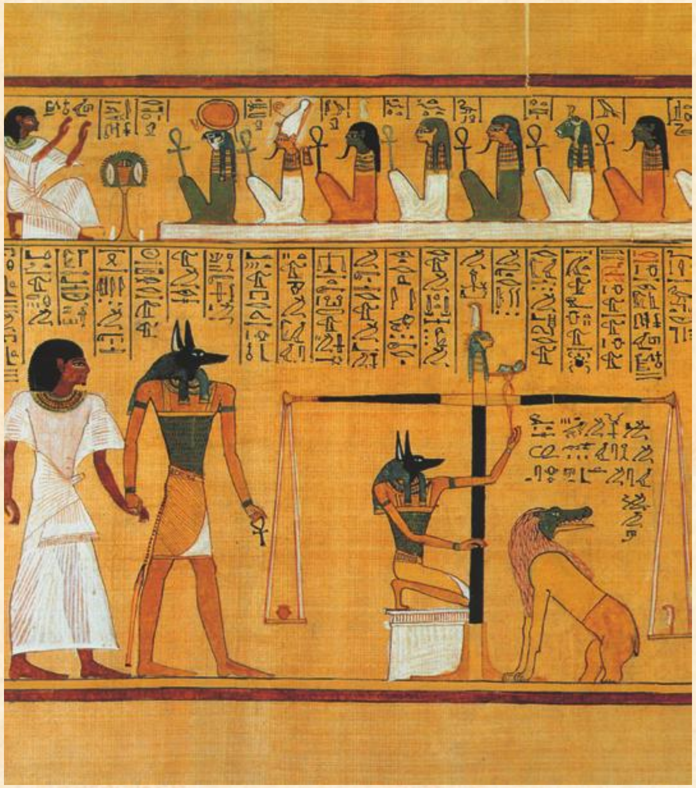
in the human body, but in virgin nature: the deities of the yellow race are like flowers, their faces like the full moon or the lotus; even the celestial nymphs of Buddhism combine their nudity—which still remains wholly Hindu in its marked sexuality and rhythm—with the flower-like grace lent them by the yellow genius. The serenity of Buddhas and the translucency of landscapes in the yellow man's art denote qualities of expression not to be found anywhere else in the same degree, qualities which are the very opposite of the tormented genius of the white peoples of Europe. Far-Eastern painting has an aerial grace, the inimitable charm of a furtive and precious vision; by compensation, the terrifying presence of dragons, genii, and demons adds to the art of the Far East a dynamic and flamboyant element.

In this art, which is much less "humanistic" than the arts of the West and of Near-Eastern antiquity, man's work remains profoundly linked with nature to the point of forming with it a sort of organic unity; the art of China and Japan does not include "pagan" elements as do the ancient arts of the Mediterranean countries; in its essential manifestations, it is never either sentimental or hollow and crushing.



191. Kuo-Hi, *Autumn Sky*, 11th century
192. Zanabazar, Cyamatara, the Savior, early 18th century

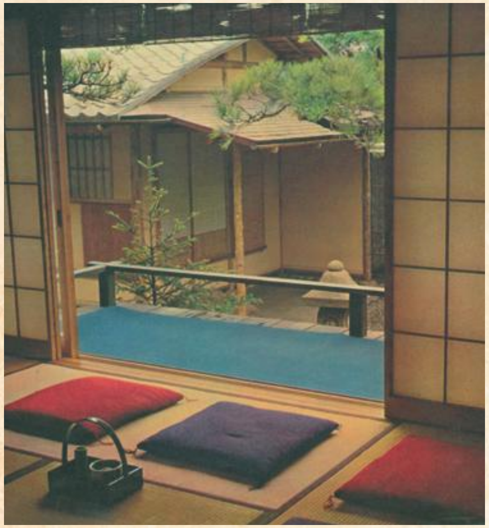
In Chinese art—setting aside Hindu influences in Buddhist art—everything seems to be derived on the one hand from the writing, which has a sacred character, and on the other hand from nature, which is also sacred and is observed lovingly as a permanent revelation of universal Principles. Certain techniques and materials—bronze, paper, Indian ink, lacquer, silk, bamboo, and porcelain—contribute to the originality of this art and determine certain of its modes. The connection between calligraphy and painting is both close and decisive, a connection also to be found in Egyptian art. Writing is a form of painting; the yellow people trace their characters with a brush and their

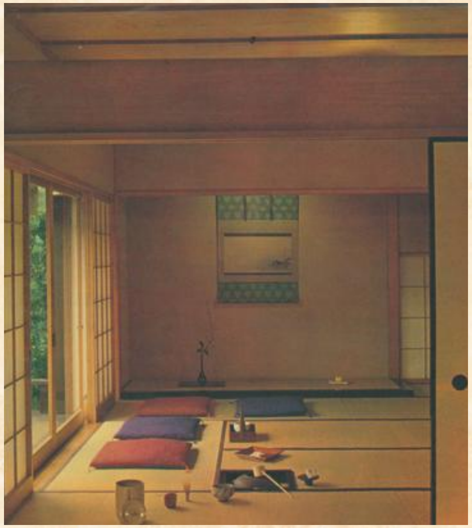


193. *Listening to the Pines*, hanging scroll, Muromachi period, c. 1433
194. Papyrus of Hunefer: the god Thoth at the Last Judgment scene, Thebes, 19th Dynasty, c. 1285 B.C.

painting holds a quality of writing; hand and eye retain the same reflexes. Of Confucianist painting it can be said that it is neither essentially sacred nor yet wholly profane; its intention is ethical in a very broad sense of that term; it tends to represent the "objective" innocence of things and not their inner reality. As for Taoist landscapes, they exteriorize a metaphysic and a contemplative state: they spring, not from space, but from the "void"; their theme is essentially "mountain and water" and with this they combine cosmological and metaphysical aims. It is one of the most powerfully original forms of sacred art; in a

195. *Lady of Highest Primordial*, Taoist painting, Ming Dynasty, c. 1600
196. Confucian sage, 19th century





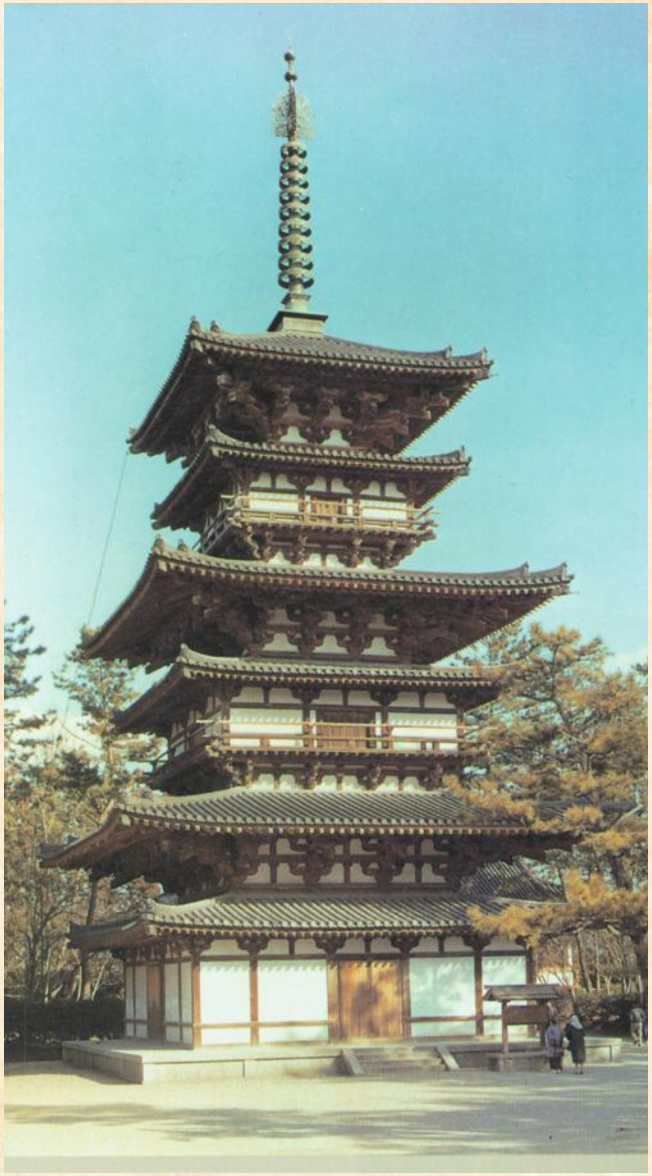
197. Interior of the Shugakuin Imperial Villa, Japan; **198-199**. Interior of a contemporary house in Tokyo

certain sense it stands at the antipodes of Hindu art in which the principle of expression is precision and rhythm and not the ethereal subtleties of a contemplation made up of imponderables. It is not surprising that Chan Buddhism (Zen in Japanese), whose character is at once unarticulated and rich in shades of meaning, should have found in Taoist art a congenial mode of expression.[4]

In architecture the major buildings of the yellow race have the same superposed curves as the pines which surround them; the wide, horned, and in a sense vegetative shape of the Far-Eastern roof—the whole usually resting on wooden columns—even if its prototype is not the sacred conifers, nonetheless retraces their dynamic and majestic life. When a man of the yellow race enters a temple or palace he enters a "forest" rather than a "cavern"; this architecture has about it something living, something vegetative and warm; even the magical intention of the

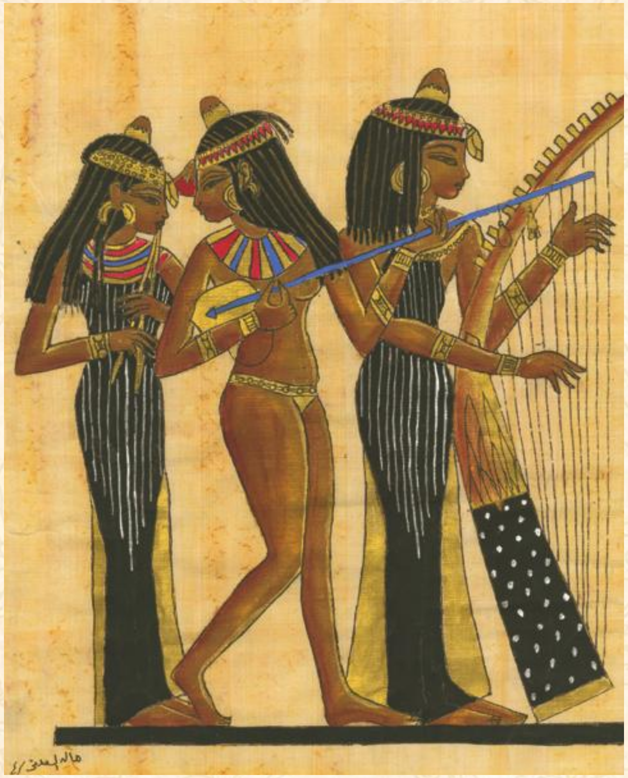
[4] In speaking of Chinese art we include also that of Japan which is a highly original branch of that art with its own particular spirit combining sobriety, boldness, elegance, and contemplative intuition. The Japanese house combines the natural nobility of materials and simplicity of forms with extreme artistic refinement and this makes it one of the most original manifestations of art as a whole. The Zen arts—like the Tea Ceremony—crystallize certain manners of acting of the Buddha, or let us say: of Primordial Man; now the Buddha never handled a sword, but if he had, he would have done so like a Zen Master. Acting like the Buddha—even at such a level as preparing tea—means: to assimilate something of the Buddha-Nature; it is an open door to Enlightenment.

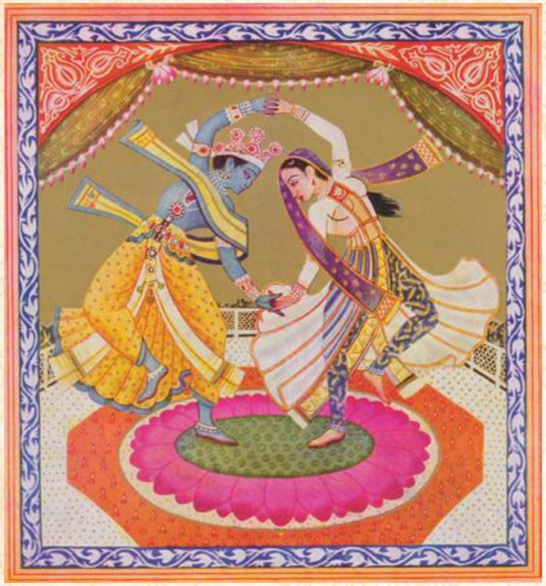
upward curved hips, which give the protecting roof a certain defensive aspect, bring us back to the connection between tree and lightning and so to virgin nature.[5]

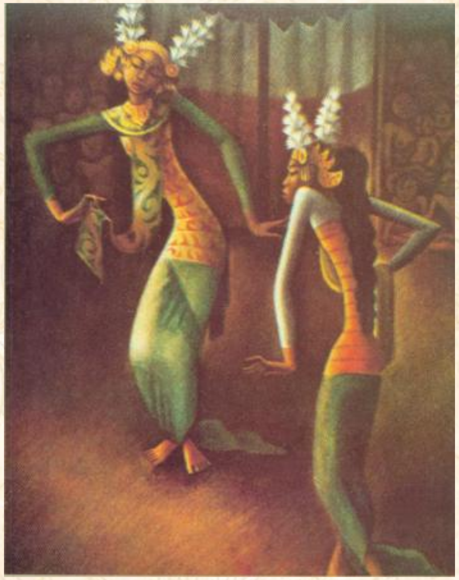


200. The Izumo shrine, Japan; **201**. East pagoda of Yakushi-ji, Nara, Japan

[5] There is a story that the Chinese roof represents a boat upside down: according to a Sino-Malayan myth the sun comes from the East in a boat and the boat is wrecked in the West and, turning over, covers the sun, thus producing night; a connection is made, not only between the overturned boat and the darkness of night, but also, as a consequence, between a roof and the sleep it protects. Another source of Far-Eastern architecture, so far as the wooden columns are concerned, may be the primitive Sino-Malayan lake-dwellings







Top left: **202**. King David playing the harp, medieval miniature; *Top center*: **203**. Three female musicians, Egyptian papyrus; *Top right*: **204** Detail of a Persian miniature; *Bottom left*: **205**. *Krishna and Radha Dancing*, contemporary Indian miniature; *Bottom center*: **206**. Monk's dance, Korea; *Bottom right*: **207**. Miguel Covarrubias, *A Scene from "Ardja"* (a Balinese opera), mid 20th century

Poetry, Music, and Dance

Architecture, painting, and sculpture are objective and static. These arts above all express forms, and their universality lies in the objective symbolism of these forms.

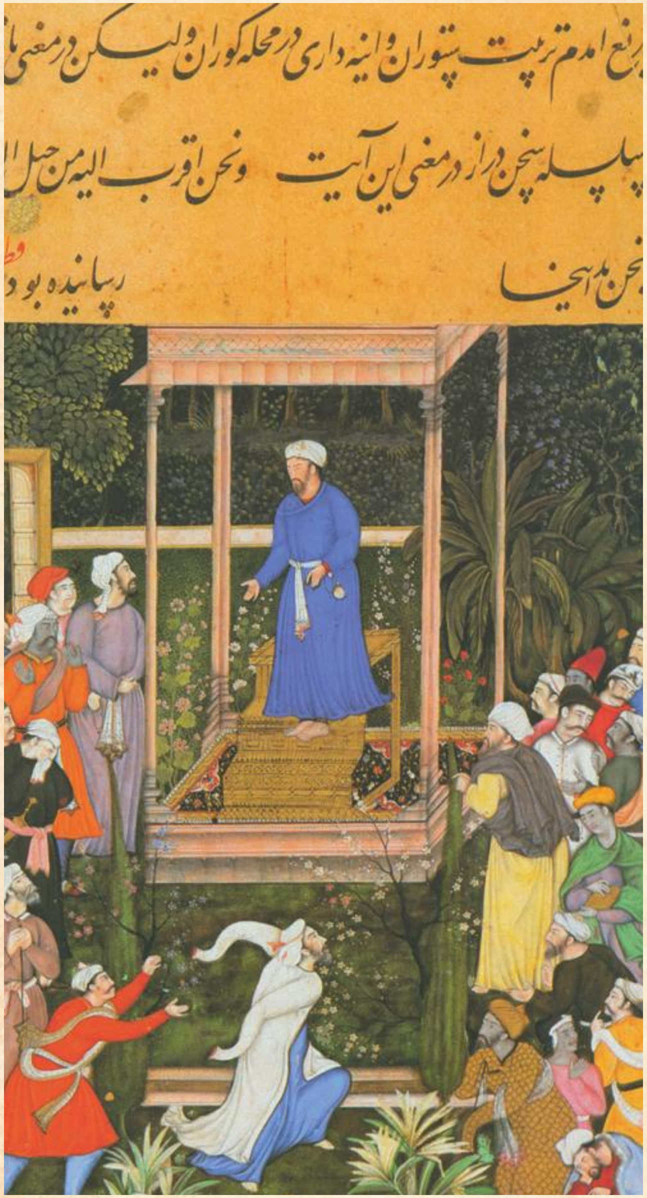
Poetry, music, and dance are subjective and dynamic. These arts first and foremost express essences, and their universality lies in the subjective reality of these essences.

Music distinguishes essences as such and does not, like poetry, distinguish their degrees of manifestation. Music can express the quality of "fire" without being able to specify—since it is not objective—whether it is a question of visible fire, of passion, of fervor, or the flame of mystic love, or of the universal fire—of angelic essence—from which all these expressions are derived. Music expresses all this at one and the same time when it gives voice to the spirit of fire, and it is for this reason that some hear the voice of passion and others the corresponding spiritual function, angelic or Divine. Music is capable of presenting countless combinations and modes of these essences by means of secondary differentiations and characteristics of melody and rhythm. It should be added that rhythm is more essential than melody, since it represents the principial or masculine determination of musical language, whereas melody is its expansive and feminine substance.

The angelic essences have been compared to streams of pure water, of wine, of milk, of honey, and of fire; they correspond to so many melodies, so many musical categories.

208. *Krishna Dances to the Beat of the Gopi's Drum*, Indian miniature, Pahari, c. 1800

Poetry should express with sincerity a beauty of the soul; one might also say: "with beauty, sincerity." It would serve no purpose to make so obvious a point but for the fact that in our days definitions of art have become increasingly falsified, either through the abuse of attributing to one art the characteristics of another, or by introducing into a definition of one art, or of all art, perfectly



209. *Saadi Reciting his Poems and Listener Dancing in Ecstasy*, miniature from Saadi's *Gulistan*, Akbar period, c. 1600

arbitrary elements such as a preoccupation with its date; as though the value or lack of value of a work of art could depend on the knowledge of whether it is modern or ancient, or on one's believing it to be ancient if it is modern or vice versa.

Contemporary poetry is mostly lacking in beauty and sincerity; it is lacking in beauty for the simple reason that the souls of the poets—or rather of those who fabricate what takes the place of poetry—are devoid of it, and it is lacking in sincerity on account of the artificial and paltry searching for unusual expressions which excludes all spontaneity. It is no longer a question of poetry but of a sort of cold and lifeless work of jewelry made up of false gems, or of a meticulous elaboration which is at the very antipodes of what is beautiful and true. Since the muse no longer gives anything, because it is rejected *a priori*,—for the last thing which a man of today would accept is to appear naïve,—vibrations are provoked in the soul and it is cut into fragments.

Whatever the caprice of the moment, it is illogical to cultivate a non-poetical poetry and to define poetry in terms of its own absence.

A finite image of Infinity:
This is the purpose of all poetry.
All human work to its last limits tends;
Its Archetype in Heaven never ends.
What is the sense of Beauty and of Art?
To show the way into our inmost Heart—

To listen to the music of the Sky:
And then to realize: the Song was I.

All that has been said above also applies in one way or another not only to poetry but also to music: here again some people arrogate to themselves the right to call realistic or sincere anything which, they say, "expresses the spirit of our age," when the reality to which they refer is only a factitious world from which they can no longer escape: they make a virtue of this incapacity and then disdainfully apply the label of "romanticism" or "nostalgia" to that innate need for harmony which is proper to every normal man. Ultra-modern music—"electronic music" for example—is founded on a despising of everything that enters into the very definition of music, as is moreover also the case, *mutatis mutandis*, of the poetic art; it becomes no more than a system of sounds—miserably fabricated—which violates the principle at the basis of it. There is no possible justification for this puerile mania for "making a clean sweep" of centuries or millennia in order to "start from scratch," to invent new "principles," new bases, new structures, for such invention is not merely senseless in itself but also incompatible with any creative sincerity. In other words some things are mutually exclusive: no one can call forth a poem from his heart while at the same time inventing out of nothing a language in which to express it. Here, as with the visual arts, the initial error is belief in a quasi-absolute originality, that is, in something which does not answer to any positive possibility, the musical sense of a racial or traditional collectivity not being capable of a modification extending to its very roots. People talk about liberating music from this or that prejudice, or convention, or constraint; what they really do is to "liberate" it from its own nature just as they have "liberated" painting from painting, poetry from poetry, and architecture from architecture; surrealism has "freed" art from art just as by execution a body has been freed from life.

This allusion to music obliges us to draw attention to the fact that at the time of the Renaissance and in the following centuries the decadence of European music and poetry was incomparably less—if indeed there was any decadence or to the extent there was—than that of the plastic arts and of architecture; there is no common measure between the sonnets of Michelangelo and the works for which he is more famous, or between Shakespeare

210. *Dervishes Dancing*, miniature from the *Kamsah* of Amir Khusran, Persia, 1485

or Palestrina and the visual art of their day. The music of the Renaissance, like that of the Middle Ages of which it is a continuation, expresses in sound what is great and chivalrous in the European soul; it makes one think of wine or mead and of stirring legends of the past. The reason for this disproportion between the arts is that intellectual decadence—decadence of contemplative, not of inventive, intelligence—is far more directly manifested in the visual arts, in which elements of intellectuality are strongly involved, than in auditive or "iterative" arts, which chiefly exteriorize the many and various states—and in the event the beauties—of that plastic substance which is the soul. In the plastic arts and in architecture the Renaissance is the art of passion and megalomania; the Baroque, is the art of dreams. In music, the Baroque exteriorizes what may be lovable, tender, or paradisal in the dream, whereas in the visual arts it manifests the illusory and ludicrous aspects, enchantment coagulating into a nightmare. In the nineteenth century romantic poetry and music reinforced and made more acute the attachments to earth; like all sentimental individualism, this was a terrible sowing of heart rending and sorrows, though in romanticism in the widest sense there are still many beauties one would wish to see integrated into a love of God.

Whilst ancient music included a spiritual value which can still be felt even in music of the end of the eighteenth century, the plane of music changed at the start of the nineteenth century so that it became in fact a kind of substitute for religion or mysticism: more than in the profane music of the preceding periods musical emotion came to assume the function of an irrational excuse for every human frailty; music grew ever more hypersensitive and grandiloquent to the very extent that everyday life was sinking into scientific rationalism and mercantile materialism. But in general it was still real music, linked with cosmic qualities and consequently capable of becoming, even if rarely, the vehicle of a movement of the soul towards Heaven.

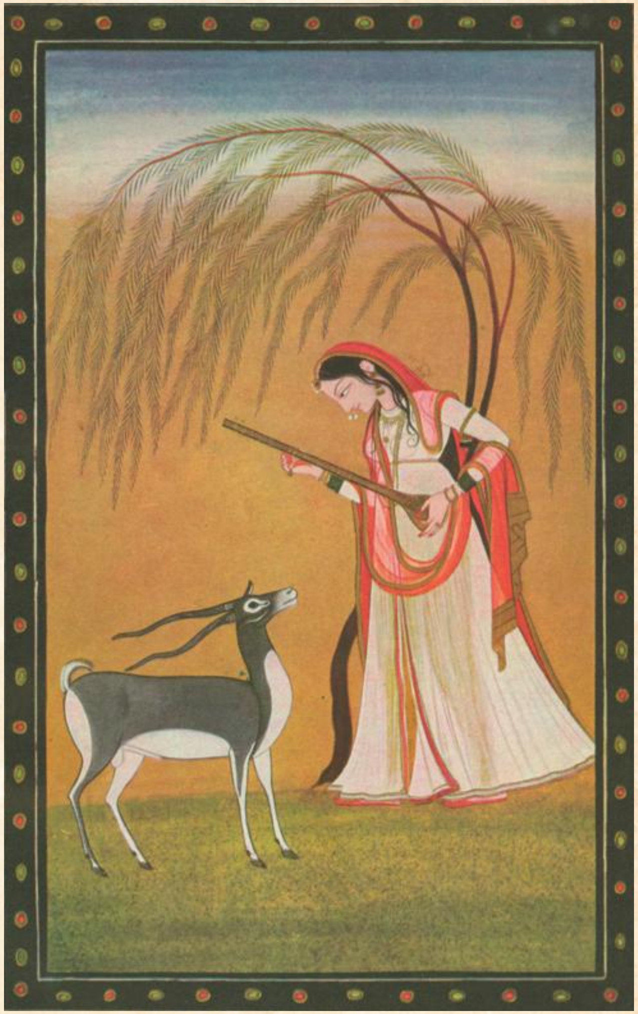
211-212. Fra Angelico, details from the *Linaiuoli Tabernacle*, Florence, 1433

Metaphysical or mystical poets such as Dante and some of the troubadours, and also the Sufi poets, expressed spiritual realities through the beauty of their souls. It is a matter of spiritual endowment far more than a question of method, for it is not given to every man sincerely to formulate truths which are beyond the range of ordinary humanity. Even if the concern was only to introduce a symbolical terminology into a poem, it would still be necessary to be a true poet in order to succeed without betrayal. Whatever one may think of the symbolistic intention of the *Vita Nuova* or the *Khamriyah* (the "Song of Wine" by Umar ibn al-Farid) or the quatrains of Omar Khayyam, it is not possible knowingly to deny the poetical quality of such works, and it is this quality which, from an artistic point of view, justifies the intention in question; moreover the same symbiosis of poetry and symbolism is to be found in prototypes of Divine inspiration such as the "Song of Songs."[1]

Visible forms manifest the heavenly essences by crystallizing them; music in a certain fashion interiorizes forms by recalling their essences through a language made of unitive sweetness and unlimitedness. Earthly music evokes in the soul the transforming "remembrance" of heavenly music, although with regard to this it may appear hard and dissonant.

According to Pythagoras and Plato, the soul has heard the heavenly harmonies before being exiled on earth, and music awakens in the soul the remembrance of these melodies.

Fundamentally, every love is a search for the Essence or the lost Paradise; the gentle or overpowering melancholy, which often appears in poetic or musical eroticism bears witness to this nostalgia for a far-off Paradise, and doubtless also to the evanescence of earthly dreams, whose sweetness is, precisely, that of a Paradise which we no longer perceive, or which we do not yet perceive. Gipsy violins evoke not only the heights and the depths of a love too



213. *The Lament of Separation*, Indian miniature, Kangra, 18th century

[1] In an analogous manner, Jalal ad-Din Rumi introduced music and dance into Sufism, not out of invention, of course, but through inspiration.

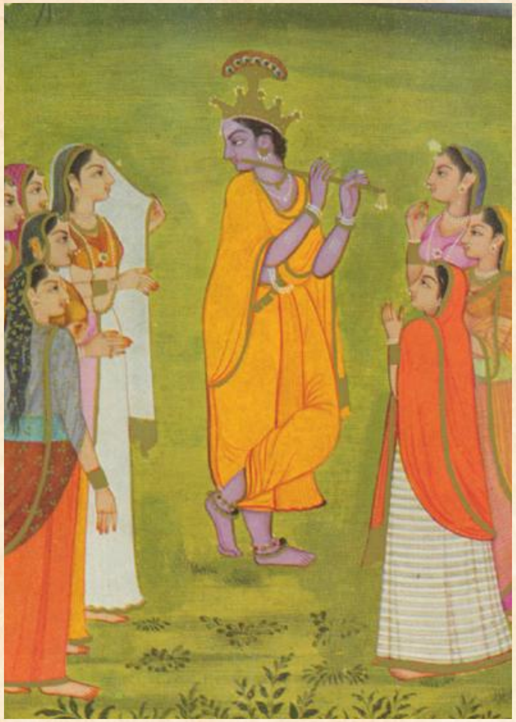
214. Whirling dervishes, Konya, Turkey
215. Flamenco dancer, Spain

human, they also celebrate, in their profoundest and most poignant accents, a thirst for the heavenly wine that is the essence of Beauty; all erotic music, to the extent of its authenticity and nobility, rejoins the sounds, both captivating and liberating, of Krishna's flute, which is the very image of ascending, not descending, nostalgia; sweetness of salvation, not of perdition.

The psychological, and indirectly spiritual, quality of people close to the soil—or to nature—is especially apparent in their music. In Europe, the forms of folk music which are the most remarkable for their power and depth are probably those of Spain and Russia, without forgetting certain medieval survivals in other lands, for example in Auvergne, where the "bourrée" has kept all the flavor of the Middle Ages. Mention should also be made of the bag-pipes, an archaic instrument endowed with a strangely African or Asian tone quality. In the greater part of Europe, the nineteenth century was fatal for music, as it was for popular art in general. The accordion, that vulgar musical machine, seems to have been expressly invented to destroy whatever is original, noble, and profound in the popular soul.

In the yellow man's soul, which is little given to declamation, the smallest things unveil their secret greatness: a flower, a cup of tea, a precise and transparent brush-stroke; the greatness preexists in things, in their primary truth. This is also expressed in the music of the Far East: tinkling sounds which form beads like the spume of a solitary cascade in a kind of morning melancholy; gong-strokes like the throbbing of a mountain of brass; chants surging from the intimacies of nature, but also from the sacred, from the solemn and golden dance of the Gods.

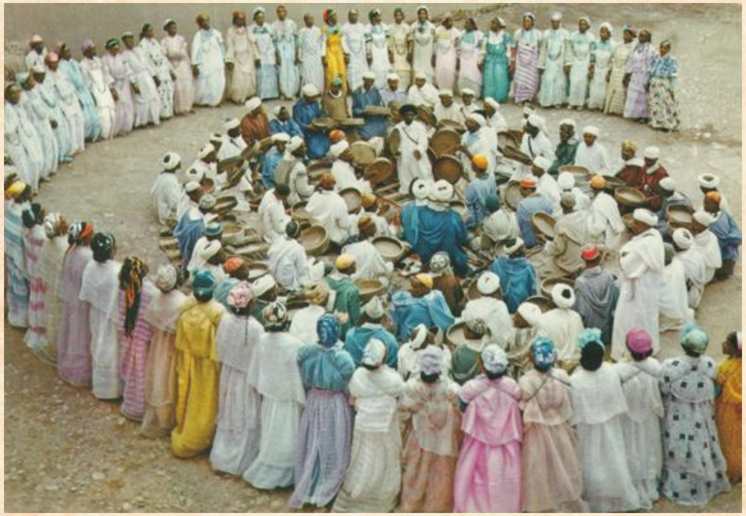
The arts are related in diverse ways to the existential conditions: thus, the plastic arts pertain to space, while poetry and music pertain to time; poetry



216. Siamese dancers; **217**. *Krishna Playing the Flute for the Gopis*, Indian miniature, Kangra, 18th century; **218**. Siamese dancers; **219**. Hindu dancer; **220**. Siamese dancers; 221. Balinese dancer

222. African drums
223-224. Folk dances in Morocco

and music are auditive and "inward," whereas painting, sculpture, architecture are visual and "outward." Dance combines space and time, while summarizing the other conditions: form being represented by the body of the dancer; number, by his movements; matter, by his flesh; energy, by his life; space, by the extension that contains his body; time, by the duration that contains his movements. It is thus that the Dance of Shiva summarizes the six conditions of existence, which are like the dimensions of *Māyā*, and *a priori* those of *Ātmā*; if the Dance of Shiva, the *Tāndava*, is said to bring about the destruction of the world, this is because, precisely, it brings *Māyā* back to *Ātmā*. And it is thus that all sacred dance brings the accidents back to the Substance, or the particular, accidental, and differentiated subject back to the universal, substantial, and one Subject; this is moreover the function of music and, more or less indirectly, of all inspired art; it is above all the function of love in all its forms, whence the character intrinsically sacred—yet ambiguous under the reign of human decadence—of love and the arts.



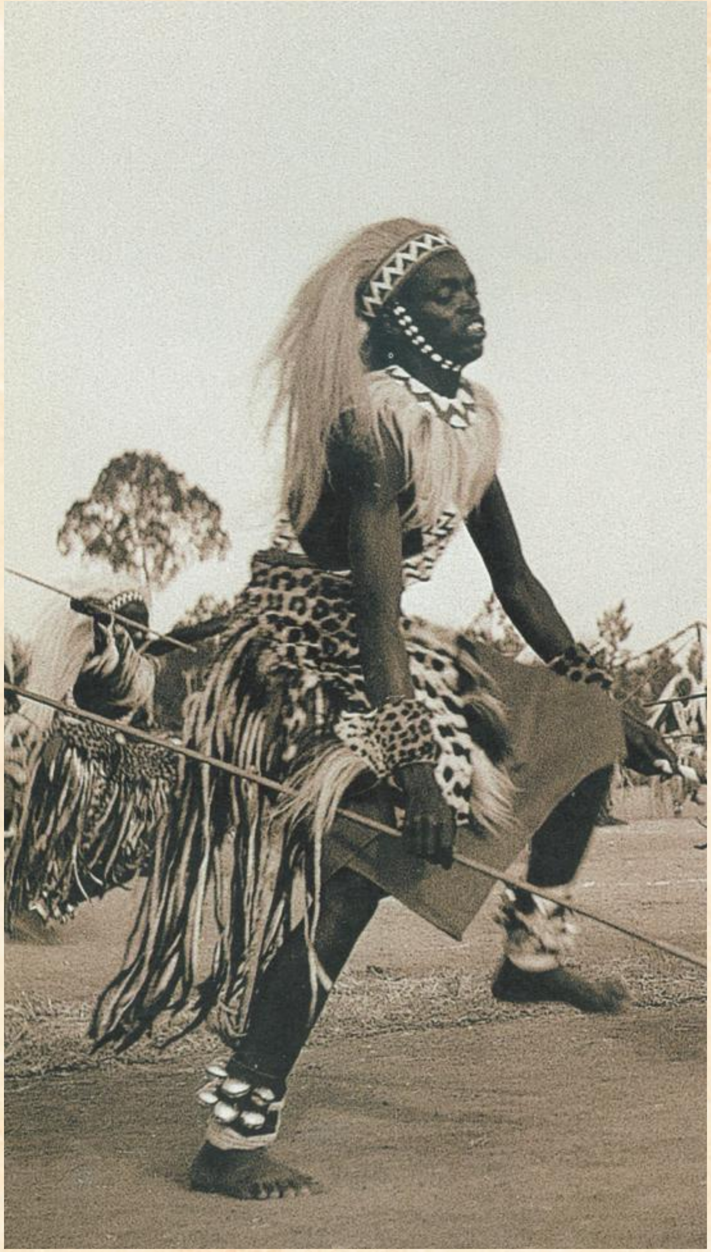
There is the visual symbol and the auditory symbol, then the acted symbol, all of which bring about the passage from the outward to the Inward, from the accident to the Substance, and thereby also from the form to the Essence.

In a particularly direct way, music and dance are supports for a passage—at whatever degree—from the accident to the Substance; and this is above all the meaning of rhythm.

Let us mention the very great importance among black peoples of drums, whose function is central and quasi-sacred: they are the vehicle for rhythms which, when communicated to human bodies, bring the whole being into contact with cosmic essences. However paradoxical it may seem, it is the intelligence rather than the body of the black man which is in need of rhythms and dances, and that precisely because his spirit has a plastic or existential and not an abstract way of approach; the body, for the very reason that it is the limit of crystallization in the demiurgic process, represents "being" as opposed to "thought," or "our whole being" as opposed to our relatively particular preoccupations or to our outward consciousness. The roll of drums marks, like heaven's thunder, the voice of Divinity: by its very nature and by its sacred origin it is a "remembrance of God," an "invocation" of the Power both creator and destroyer and thus also liberator, through which human art canalizes the divine manifestation and in which man participates through dancing; he thus participates with all his being in order to regain the heavenly fluidity through the "analogical vibrations" between matter and the Spirit. The drum is the altar, its roll marks the descent of God, and the dance the ascent of man.

We meet with the same symbolism in dervish dances and, in principle, in every ritual dance. Love dances, harvest dances, or war dances are designed to abolish the barriers between different levels of existence and to establish a direct contact with the "genius" or "divine Name" in question. Human infidelities do not in any way change the principle or take away the value of the means: whatever may be the importance given to utilitarian considerations or to magical procedures in the case of some African animism or some Siberian

225. Karl Bodmer, *Hidatsa Sioux Warrior in the Costume of the Dog Dance*, 19th century



226-227. African dancers from Banda
228-229. African dancers from Zaire

or Red Indian shamanism, the symbols remain what they are and the bridges towards heaven are doubtless never altogether broken down.

The magic power of a sacred song,
The thunder of a drum afar one hears.
The movement of the stars is in the dance,
The everlasting music of the spheres.

Our inner truth needs to be heard and seen:
The dance means our deep nature and its speech.
Our body shows the language of the Self;
It lets us grasp what thinking cannot reach.

Dancing is born of nature's inner part;
From thence it comes, then goes back to the Heart.

230. Flamenco dancer

231. Little Wound, Sioux chief; **232**. The traditional Hindu sari; **233**. Arabian Shaykh;
234. Abbot of the Zographou Cloister, Bulgaria; **235**. A Japanese geisha; **236**. Portrait of King Richard II, 14th century

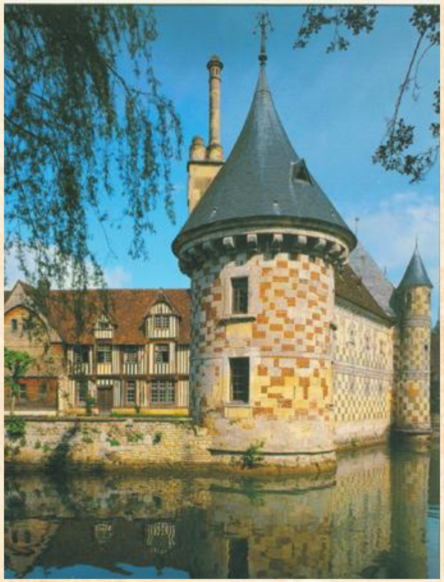
The Art of Dress and Ambience

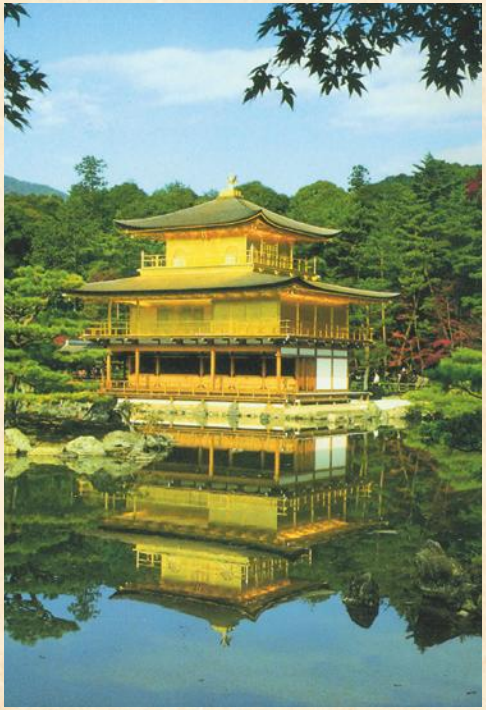
When the arts are enumerated the art of dress is too often forgotten though it none the less has an importance as great, or almost as great, as architecture. Doubtless no civilization has ever produced summits in every field. Thus the Arab genius, made up of virility and resignation, has produced a masculine dress of unsurpassed nobility and sobriety, whereas it has neglected feminine dress, which is destined in Islam, not to express the "eternal feminine" as does Hindu dress, but to hide woman's seductive charms. The Hindu genius, which in a certain sense divinizes the "wife-mother," has on the other hand created a feminine dress unsurpassable in its beauty, its dignity, and its femininity. One of the most expressive and one of the least-known forms of dress is that of the Red Indians, with its rippling fringes and its ornaments of a wholly primordial symbolism; here man appears in all the solar glory of the hero, and woman in the proud modesty of her impersonal function.

The art of dress of every civilization, and even of every people, embraces many varying forms in time and space, but the spirit always remains the same, though it does not always reach the same heights of direct expression and immediate intelligibility.

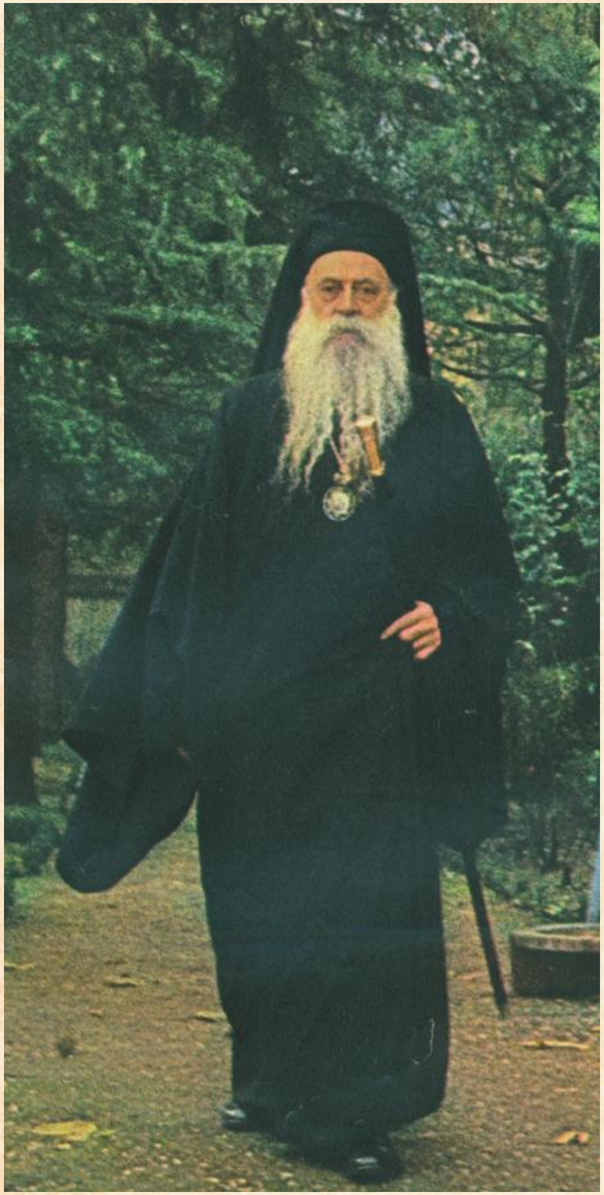
A building, whether it be a temple, a palace, or a house, represents the universe—or a given world or microcosm—seen in conformity with a particular traditional perspective. Thus it also represents the "mystical body," the caste, or the family, according to the particular case.

Dress exteriorizes either the spiritual or social function, or the soul: and these two aspects may be combined. Clothing is opposed to nakedness as the soul is opposed to the body, or as the spiritual function—the priestly function for example—is opposed to animal nature. When clothing is combined with





237. Castle of Saint Germain de Livet, Normandy, France, 15th-16th century
238. The Golden Pavilion, Muromachi period, Kyoto, 1397



239. His Holiness Athenagoras, Ecumenical Patriarch

nakedness—as in the case of the Hindus, for example,—then the latter appears in its qualitative and sacred aspect.

The existence of princely and sacerdotal attire proves that garments confer to man a personality; that they express or manifest a function which transcends or ennobles the individual. By manifesting a function, dress represents thereby the virtues corresponding to it.

What is admirable in the Orthodox Church is that all its forms, from the iconostases to the vestments of the priests, immediately suggest the ambience of Christ and the Apostles, whereas in what might be called the post-Gothic Catholic Church too many forms are expressions of ambiguous civilizationism or bear its imprint, that is, the imprint of this sort of parallel pseudo-religion which is "Civilization" with a capital C: the presence of Christ then becomes largely abstract. The argument that "only the spirit matters" is hypocrisy, for it is not by chance that a Christian priest wears neither the toga of a Siamese bonze nor the loin-cloth of a Hindu ascetic. No doubt the "cloak does not make the monk"; but it is also said "*Kleider machen Leute*" ("clothes make the man"); the costume does not change the man *ex opere operato*, certainly, but it actualizes in a normally predisposed man—thus one who is sensitive to duties and virtues—a given awareness of the norm and a given conformity to the archetype. And it goes without saying that a man can only don a vestment to which he is entitled in one degree or another; the usurpation is as debasing as vanity; and "*noblesse oblige*."

Outward forms are criteria. It is either false or insufficient to allege that Saint Louis wore the costume of his period and that, *mutatis mutandis*, Louis XIV did the same; the truth is that Saint Louis wore the dress of a Western Christian king, whereas Louis XIV wore that of a monarch who was already more "civilized" than Christian, the first epithet referring, needless to say, to "civilizationism" and not to civilization in the general sense of the word. The appearance of Saint Louis is that of an idea which has reached the fullness of its ripening; it marks, not a phase, but a thing accomplished, a thing which is

entirely what it ought to be. The appearance of a king of the Renaissance or of the age immediately following is the appearance, not of a thing, but of a phase—nor yet even a phase, but an extravagant episode.[1] Whereas we have no difficulty in taking seriously the appearance not only of a Saint Louis, but also of a Pharaoh, an Emperor of China, or for that matter, a Red Indian chief, it is impossible to escape an impression of ridiculousness when confronted by the famous portraits of certain kings [see ills. 243, 244, and 245]. These portraits, or rather these poses and these accoutrements, which the portraits so humourlessly and pitilessly fix, are supposed to combine all imaginable sublimities, some of which cannot in fact be fitted together into a single formula,

[1] This is explained in part by the unrealistic and clumsy scission between a religious world and a secular world, the latter never having been integrated normally into the religion, whence the Renaissance on the one hand and the Reformation on the other. The specifically worldly character of male dress subsequently becomes even more accentuated and gives rise, throughout history and in the same way as female dress, to an unbalanced lurching between contrary excesses, ending with the sort of barbarous nothingness that prevails in our own age.

240. *Saint Louis Blessing a Crusader*, medieval picture Bible
241. *Edward I*, medieval miniature
242. Portrait of Emperor Hung-Chih, Ming Dynasty, 15th century

243. Diego Velazquez, *Philip IV of Spain*, 1631-32
244. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Henry VIII*, 1540
245. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV*, 1701

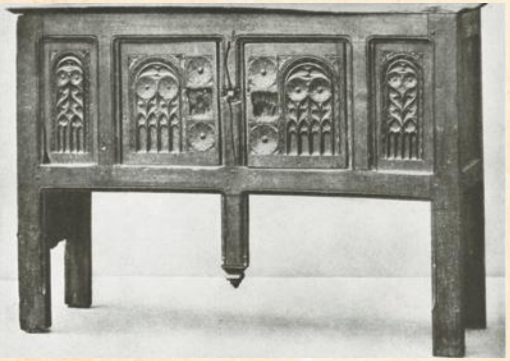
246. French commode, 1739
247. Italian cabinet, c. 1660
248. Lacquer commode, Louis XV, 18th century

for it is impossible to have everything at one and the same time; the hieratic and as it were incorporeal splendor of a Christian emperor cannot be piled up on top of the paradisal naked splendor of an ancient hero.

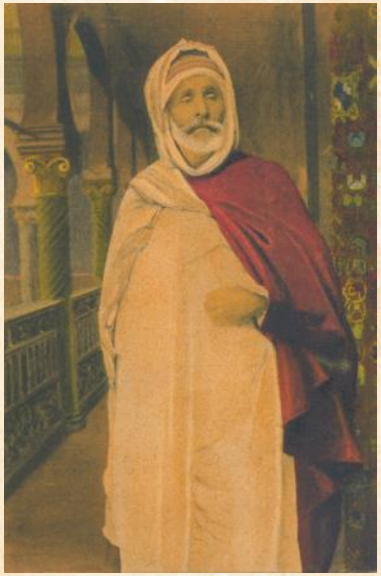
Saint Louis, or any other Christian prince of his time, could figure amongst the kings and queens—in the form of columns—of the cathedral of Chartres; the later kings—those more marked by an invading worldliness—would be unthinkable as sacred statues.

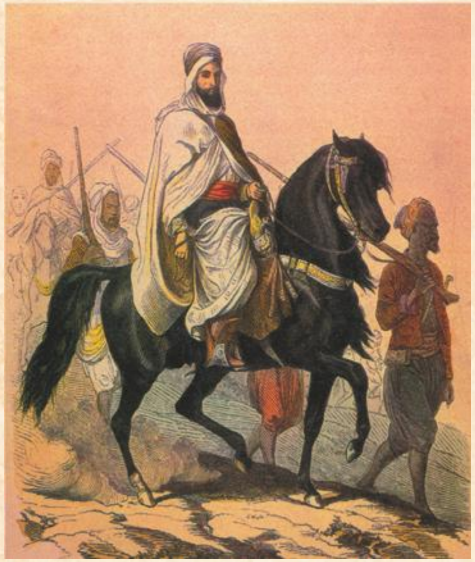
The column statues of Chartres have, like an iconostasis, the value of a criterion of formal orthodoxy: no exhibition of individualism or of profanity could find a place amongst them.

What we say of clothes holds good equally for interior fittings, especially furniture. It is hardly credible that the same men that made the marvels of sober majesty that are Gothic and Nordic furniture, could have created and tolerated the lacquered and gilded horrors of the courtly and bourgeois furniture of the eighteenth century; that the noble and robust gravity of the works of the Middle Ages could have given way to the miserable affectation of later works; in short, that utility and dignity should have been replaced by a hollow, trivial, and flaunting luxuriousness.



249. Late Gothic chest, north Italy, late 15th century; **250**. Gothic standing cupboard, England, mid 16th century; **251**. Figures from the Central portal of the West front, Chartres Cathedral, 13th century

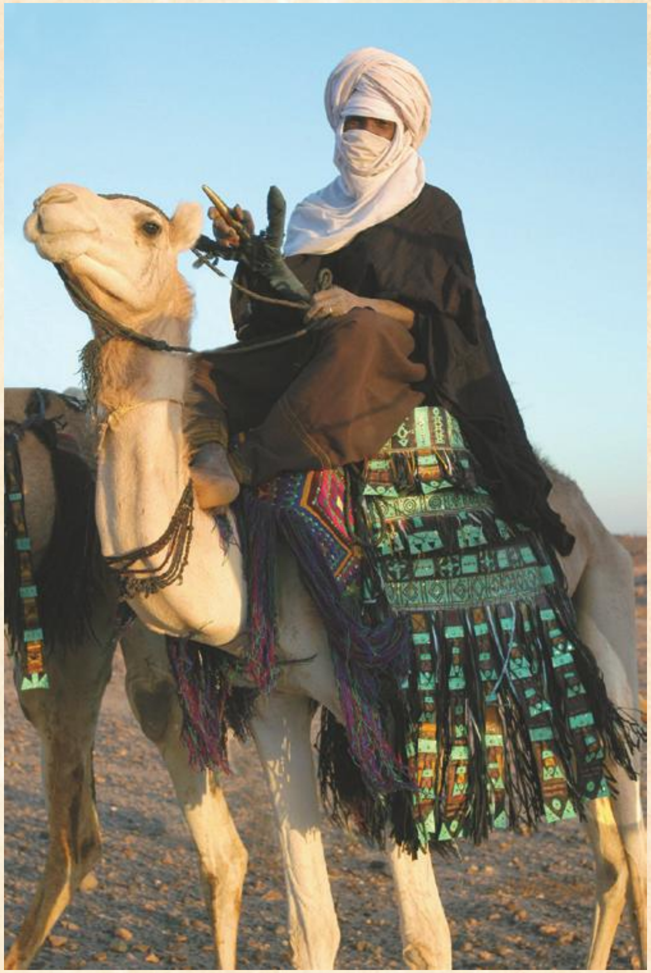




Top left: **252**. Arabian Shaykh; *Center*: **253**. The Vizier of Meknes going to the mosque; *Top right*: **254**. Algerian notable; *Bottom left*: **255**. Portrait of Amir Abd al-Qadir (1808-1883) on horseback; *Bottom right*: **256**. Moroccan dervish

The Maghribi garb—like other non-worldly Muslim garbs—suggests resignation to the Will of God, and more profoundly the mystery of Peace, *dār as-Salām*. And this calls for another comment: if it is true that Maghribi garb, or any other analogous Muslim garb, manifests *de facto* a religious perspective, exclusivist by definition, along with the specific *barakah* it contains, it is no less true—and necessarily so—that this garb manifests at the same time attitudes and mysteries appertaining to esoterism, and that in this sense it suggests no confessional limitation. Each civilization produces, by heavenly inspiration, several paragon phenomena; the representative dress of Islam is an example of this, as are the arabesques, the *mihrāb*, and the call to prayer.

The association of ideas between the turban and Islam is far from fortuitous: "The turban," said the Prophet, "is a frontier between faith and unbelief," and he also said: "My community shall not decline so long as they wear the turban." The following *ahādīth*[2] are also quoted in this context: "At the Day of Judgment a man shall receive a light for each turn of turban round his head"; "Wear turbans, for thus you will gain in generosity." The point we wish to make is that the turban is deemed to give the believer a sort of gravity, consecration, and majestic humility;[3] it sets him apart from chaotic and dissipated creatures, fixing him on a divine axis and thus destines him for contemplation; in brief, the turban is like a celestial counterpoise to all that is profane and empty. Since it is the head, the brain, which is for us the plane of our choice between true and false, durable and ephemeral, real and illusory, serious and futile, it is the head which should also bear the mark of this choice; the material symbol is deemed to reinforce the spiritual consciousness, and this is moreover true of every religious headdress and even of every liturgical vestment or merely traditional dress. The turban so to speak envelops man's thinking, always so prone to dissipation, forgetfulness, and infidelity; it



257. Tuareg nomad, Niger

[2] *Ahādīth* (Arabic, plural of *hadīth*): sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

[3] In Islam all the prophets are represented as wearing turbans, sometimes of differing colors according to the symbolism.

258. Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi (1869-1934), Algeria

recalls the sacred imprisoning of his passional nature prone to flee from God.[4] It is the function of the Koranic Law to re-establish a primordial equilibrium that was lost; hence the *hadīth*: "Wear turbans and thus distinguish yourselves from the peoples (lacking in equilibrium) who came before you."

Hatred of the turban, like hatred of the romantic or the picturesque or what belongs to folklore, is explained by the fact that the romantic worlds are precisely those in which God is still plausible. When people want to abolish Heaven, it is logical to start by creating an atmosphere which makes spiritual things appear out of place; in order to be able to declare successfully that God is unreal they have to construct around man a false reality, one that is inevitably inhuman because only the inhuman can exclude God. What is involved is a falsification of the imagination and so its destruction; modern mentality implies the most prodigious lack of imagination possible.

The dress of the Muslims indicates a *khalwah*,[5] an "interiorization" made of holy poverty and divine Peace. It should be noted in this context that the partial nudity combined with a profusion of precious stones, found among the ancient maharajas, is not gaudy luxury, it is a quasi-celestial splendor befitting their status as demigods. Altogether different is the sumptuousness, part-bigot, part-worldly, of many a Turkish sultan, which can hardly be admired, except for the ceremonial robes when taken on their own, the inspiration for which is fundamentally Mongol.

A fascinating combination of combative and stoical heroism with a priestly bearing conferred on the Indian of the Plains and Forests a sort of majesty at once aquiline and solar; hence the powerfully original and irreplaceable

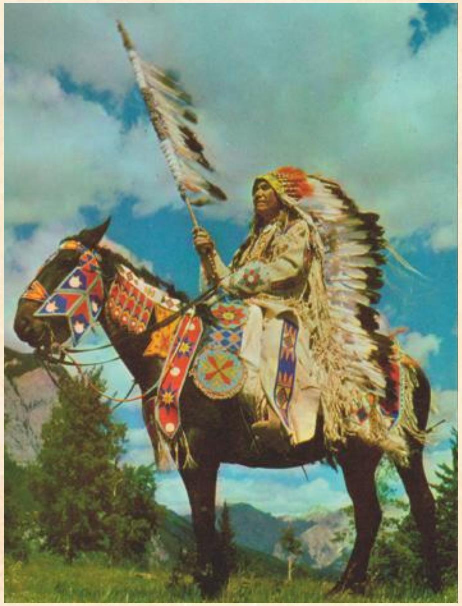
[4] When Saint Vincent de Paul designed the headdress of the Sisters of Charity, he intended to impose on their gaze a kind of reminiscence of monastic isolation.

[5] *Khalwah* (Arabic): spiritual retreat.

beauty that is associated with the red man and contributes to his prestige as a warrior and as a martyr. Like the Japanese of the time of the Samurai, the Red Indian was in the deepest sense an artist in the outward manifestation of his personality: apart from the fact that his life was a ceaseless sporting with suffering and death, hence also a kind of chivalrous *karma yoga*, the Indian knew how to impart to this spiritual style an aesthetic adornment unsurpassable in its expressiveness.

The simplicity of his ancestral style of life created the ambience that allowed his genius to affirm itself; what we wish to say is that the object of this genius, as is the case moreover for most nomads or semi-nomads and certainly for warrior hunters, is far less the outward artistic creation than the

259. Middle Rider, Sioux
260. Plains Indian chief praying with the Pipe



261. Stoney Indian chief on horseback
262. Sioux Indian chief and his teepees

soul itself, the whole man, which is the plastic matter of the "primordial artist." In a civilization based on Nature and Man in their primeval functions, art is made for man and not man for art, and indeed Indian art is foremost a "frame" for this divine, central, and free creation that the human being represents. This is what accounts for the high quality attained by the art of apparel: majestic headdresses—especially the great eagle-feathered headdress—garments streaming with fringes and embroidered with solar symbols, shimmering moccasins that seem to release the feet from all weight, feminine robes of exquisite simplicity. This art, in its concise as well as its richest expression is perhaps not one of the subtlest, but assuredly one of the most brilliantly inspired there is.

The attire of the Plains Indians "humanizes" virgin nature, it transmits something of the immensity of the prairies, the depth of the forest, the violence of the wind, and other affinities of the kind. Embroidered with archaic symbols and ornamented with fringes, it expresses at once victory and serenity: victory over the soul's weaknesses—the inward "holy war"—and sacerdotal dignity, which is serene and generous; the first element is represented by the embroiderings, which "proclaim" heroism or the sacred, and the second by the fringes, which "bless" the earth.

The fringes first of all recall rain, which is an important image since rain is a message from heaven to earth. But the fringes also symbolize the spiritual fluid of the human person—his *orenda*, as the Iroquois would say, or his *barakah*, as would say the Arabs. This observation is all the more plausible when one thinks that instead of the fringes shirts are often decorated with horsehair or with scalps;[6] now hair, as is well known, is the vehicle of a magical power, an *orenda* precisely. We could also say that the fringes are derived from the feathers of a bird, of the eagle above all: arms adorned with fringes are "magically" and spiritually equivalent to the wings of an eagle. Sometimes ermine

[6] As is proven by history, the sense of the sacred does not exclude ferocity, with the Red Indians any less than with the Zenist Samurai or with our very Christian knights of the Middle Ages.

skins are added to the fringes, thus conferring upon them a quasi-royal symbolism, the ermine being everywhere considered as a sign of majesty.

The most diverse objects may be adorned with embroideries and fringes; one of the most important is the bag containing the Calumet and the ritual tobacco, the function of the latter being to sacrifice itself by burning and to rise towards the Great Spirit.

The garb of the chief or the hero suggests the eagle soaring towards the sun: the nature of the eagle is to fly upwards, hence also to see things from afar, from "above" precisely: the eagle soars and then circles in a luminous solitude.[7]

One of the most powerful symbols of the sun is the majestic headdress made of eagle feathers; he who wears it is identified with the solar orb, and it is easy to understand that not everyone is qualified to wear it; its splendor—unique of its kind among all traditional headdresses in the world—suggests both royal and priestly dignity, thus the radiance of the hero and the sage.[8] According to an almost universal tradition, the eagle itself symbolizes the sun, which precisely is expressed by the eagle-feather bonnet. Formerly, each feather had to be earned: the identification of man with the solar orb demands a heroic drama. This is demonstrated by the Sun Dance which implies a multiple victory over the inferior *Māyā*, that of the world and that of the ego, spiritually speaking.

Doubtless, our Indians have no sacred art properly so called apart from that ritual object of primary importance which is the Calumet;[9] nonetheless, they possess to the highest degree the sense of the sacred, and they replace

[7] In this respect one may recall that the great Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani was traditionally called "the Great Hawk."

[8] According to the French authors Thévenin and Coze it is "the most majestic headdress ever conceived by the human genius" (*Moeurs et Histoire des Peaux-Rouges*). Sometimes the feather bonnet is adorned with the horns of the buffalo, which adds to it a pontifical symbol. The feathered spear—the solar ray—prolongs the headdress in a dynamic and combative mode.

[9] Neither did Shintoism have a figurative art before the arrival of Buddhism.

263. Mountain Chief, Blackfeet warrior, 1913

264. Ute Indian maiden
265. Southern Cheyenne tobacco bag

the element "sacred art" with what we could call a "liturgy" of virgin nature.[10]

To return to the question of Indian dress: it is too often supposed that the decorative style of the Indians consists in no more than a series of geometric designs of one kind or another, but this is not at all the case for, on the contrary, this style is very rigorous and original, whatever may be the techniques by which it is manifested, and aside from the variety of its modes. It is in fact an essentially feminine art, as far as the artists are concerned; the art of the men is above all figurative—except for the feathered sun—and is used to decorate the teepees and the blankets, and sometimes the shields and the garments. I shall add that there are two poles in all traditional art: the symbolic content due to the immanent intellect, and the stylization due to the racial soul.

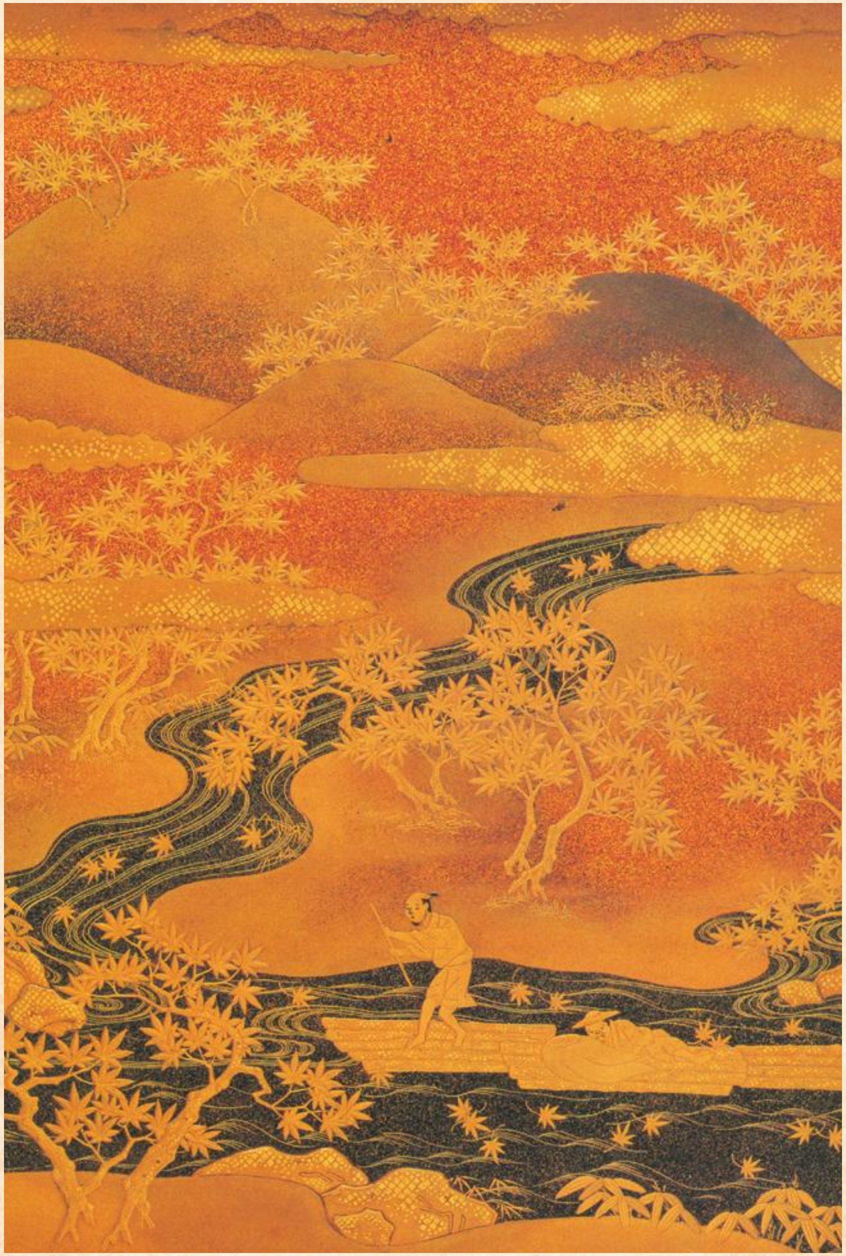
What we said about the Plains Indian's vestimentary art applies in substance to all traditional garb possessing, either directly or indirectly, a sacerdotal character although the spiritual points of emphasis can be different; this is obvious, and has already been alluded to.

The forms manifesting an ethnic genius, hence those that are more or less "revealed," are always greater than the median level of those who express it. When we speak of the spiritual meanings of spe-

[10] Highly significant, in its very exaggeration, was the reaction of a Sioux chief—quoted by Charles Eastman in *The Indian Today*—on being shown a picture gallery. "So this is the white man's strange wisdom," he exclaimed. "He cuts down the forests which have stood in pride and grandeur for centuries, he tears up the breast of our mother the earth, and befouls the streams of clear water; without pity he disfigures the paintings and monuments of God and then bedaubs a surface with color and calls it a masterpiece!" In this connection it must be pointed out that the painting of the Red Indians is a writing, or, to be more precise, a pictography.

cific elements in traditional art—for example the "heroic" and the "sacerdotal" elements or the "active" and "passive" perfections—what we have in mind is the archetypical language of things and not their immediate or outward motivation, assuming that such a motivation exists; for the symbolism expressed by an ethnic genius is *de facto* mostly unconscious, although it can be reflected in traits of character.

266. Indian maharajah
267. Tibetan priest
268. Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko, Japan, mid 20th century



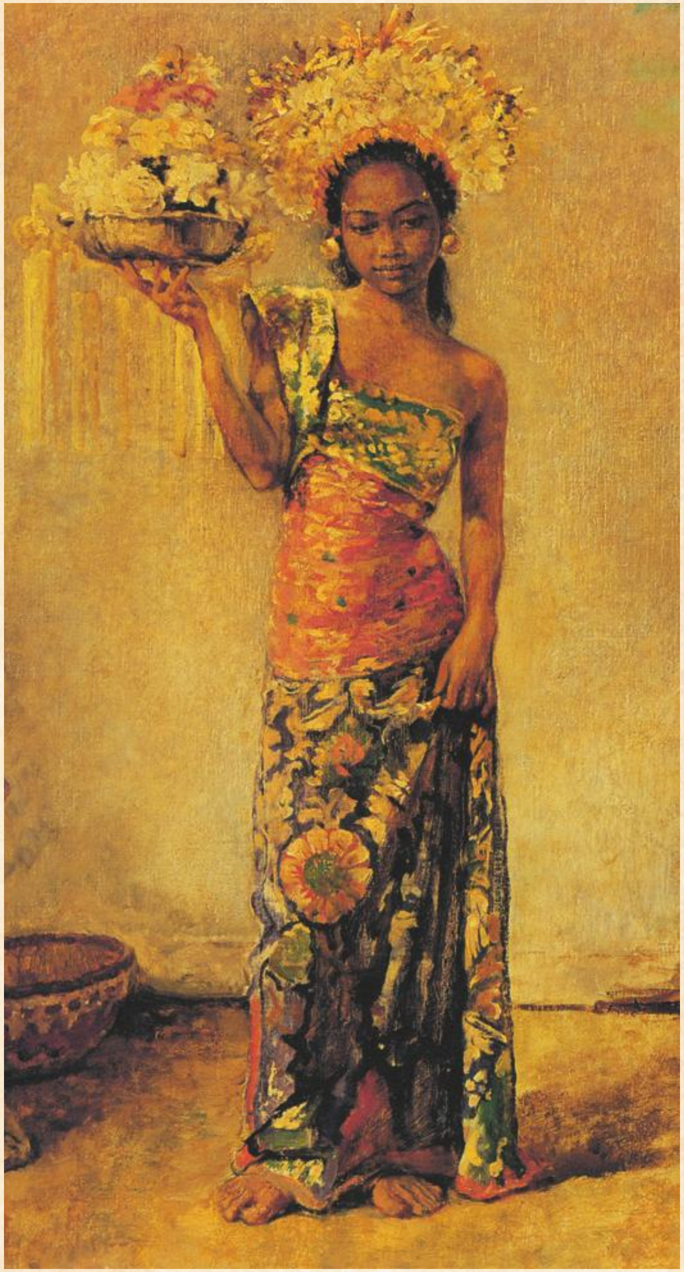
269. *Maples along the Tatsuta River*, lacquer box, Japan, 19th century

One has to keep clearly in mind the following: the marvels of the basilicas and the cathedrals, of the iconostases and the altar pieces, as well as the splendors of the Tibeto-Mongol and Japanese art or, prior to it, those of Hindu art, not forgetting the summits of the corresponding literatures—all this did not exist in the primitive epochs of these various traditions, epochs which were precisely the "golden ages" of these spiritual universes. Thus it appears that the marvels of traditional culture are like the swan songs of the celestial messages; in other words, to the extent that the message runs the risk of being lost, or is effectively lost, a need is felt—and Heaven itself feels this need—to exteriorize gloriously all that men are no longer capable of perceiving within themselves. Thenceforth it is outward things that have to remind men where their center lies; it is true that this is in principle the role of virgin nature, but in fact its language is only grasped where it assumes traditionally the function of a sanctuary. Moreover, the two perspectives—sacred art and virgin nature—are not mutually exclusive, as is shown notably by Zen Buddhism; this proves that neither can altogether replace the other.

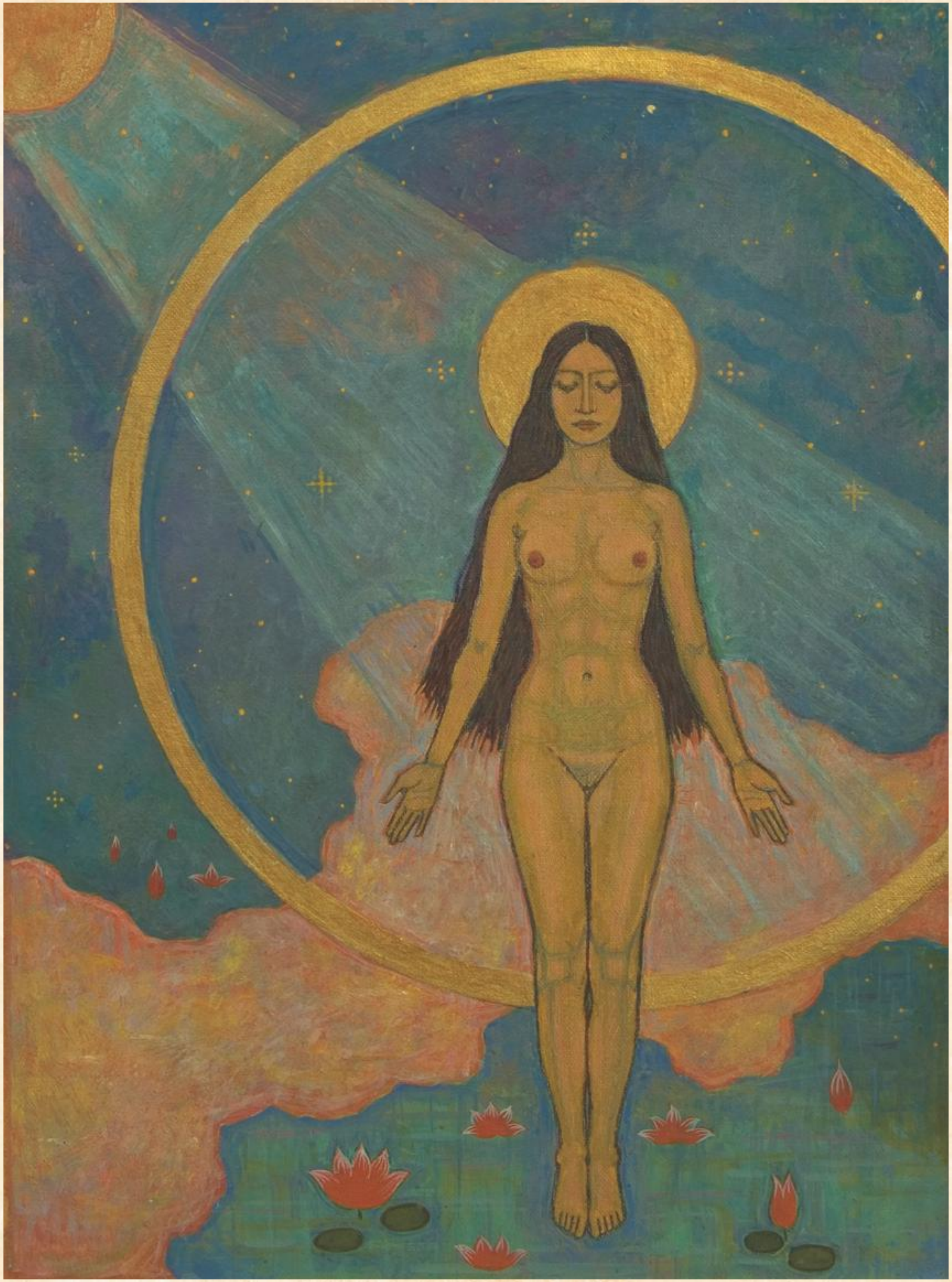
One would like for this lower world to be as a living museum in which peoples would display nothing but their beautiful aspects—Bali comes to mind, in passing—but then it would already be the heavenly world. And yet it is a kind of realism as well as nobleness to dwell less on the consideration of accidents than on that of archetypal values; this is certainly not to dream, quite on the contrary.

Islands of bliss and everlasting youth,
Floating like flowers on an endless sea
And never touched by sorrows of this world:
Such happy islands thou wilt never see.

Behold: what thou hast dreamt of may be real,
It is not elswehere, it is what thou art
If thou rememb'rest God; then thou wilt find
The golden island in thy deepest heart.



270. Willem Hofker, *Ni Tjawan*, Bali, 1938



271. Frithjof Schuon,
The Creation of Woman,
1974

Beauté

"Dieu est beau et Il aime la beauté." (Hadîth)

La beauté doit avoir par elle-même une fonction spirituelle, sans quoi il n'y aurait pas de beauté.

Cette fonction est l'intériorisation. L'émotion esthétique se mêle à l'invocation; et cette alchimie intériorisante confère la capacité de résister à la tentation.

La beauté peut mener à la passion et au péché, mais dans le cas de personnes contemplatives — de saints comme Râmakrishna — elle a mené à l'extase. C'est là le mystère du Darshan: de l'union avec une réalité archétypique par la perception sensorielle.

L'intériorisation de la beauté présuppose la noblesse et produit la noblesse.

Étant donné la dégénérescence spirituelle de l'humanité, le plus haut degré possible de beauté, lequel appartient au corps humain, ne saurait jouer de rôle dans la piété ordinaire; mais cette théophanie peut être un support dans la spiritualité ésotérique, ce que montre l'art sacré des Hindous et des Bouddhistes. La nudité signifie l'intériorité, l'essentialité, la primordialité et par conséquent l'universalité; le vêtement signifie la fonction sociale, et aussi, dans ce cadre, la fonction sacerdotale. La nudité signifie la gloire, l'irradiation d'une substance ou énergie spirituelle; le corps est la forme de l'essence et ainsi l'essence de la forme.

Mais il n'y a pas que la beauté visuelle; la poésie, la musique et la danse sont elles aussi des moyens d'intériorisation; non par elles-mêmes, mais combinées avec le souvenir du Souverain Bien.

Beauty

"God is beautiful and He loves beauty" (*hadīth*).

Beauty must have in itself a spiritual function, otherwise there would be no beauty.

This function is interiorization. The aesthetic emotion mingles with invocatory prayer; and this interiorizing alchemy confers the capacity to resist temptation.

Beauty may lead to passion and sin, but in the case of contemplative persons—of saints like Ramakrishna—it has led to ecstasy. This is the mystery of *darshan*: of union with an archetypical reality through sensory perception.

The interiorization of beauty presupposes nobility and produces nobility.

Given the spiritual degeneration of mankind, the highest possible degree of beauty, that of the human body, plays no role in ordinary piety; but this theophany may be a support in esoteric spirituality, as is shown in Hindu and Buddhist sacred art. Nudity means inwardness, essentiality, primordiality and thus universality; clothing signifies social function, and in this framework the sacerdotal function as well. Nudity means glory, radiation of spiritual substance or energy; the body is the form of the essence and thus the essence of the form.

But there is not visual beauty only; poetry, music, and dance are likewise means of interiorization; not in themselves, but combined with the remembrance of the Sovereign Good.

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Sources

The text of this book consists of specially arranged excerpts from the following works of Frithjof Schuon:

Castes and Races, chapter "Principles and Criteria of Art."
Christianity/Islam, chapter "On the Margin of Liturgical Improvisations."
Esoterism as Principle and as Way, chapters "Foundations of an Integral Aesthetics," "Degrees of Art," and "The Role of Appearances."
From the Divine to the Human, chapters "Structure and Universality of the Conditions of Existence," "The Message of the Human Body," "The Sense of the Sacred," and "To Refuse or to Accept Revelation."
In the Face of the Absolute, chapter "*Sedes Sapientiae*."
Light on the Ancient Worlds, chapters "The Ancient Worlds in Perspective" and "The Shamanism of the Red Indians."
Logic and Transcendence, chapters "The Saint and the Divine Image" and "Truths and Errors Concerning Beauty."
Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts, section "Aesthetics and Symbolism in Art and Nature."
To Have a Center, chapters "To Have a Center," "Fundamental Keys," and "A Message of Vestimentary Art."
The Transcendent Unity of Religions, chapter "Concerning Forms in Art."
Treasures of Buddhism, chapter "Treasures of Buddhism."
Understanding Islam, chapters "Islam" and "The Path."
Poems from *Road to the Heart*.
Excerpts from private correspondence.

Biographical Notes

Catherine Schuon was born on August 13, 1924 in Bern, Switzerland. As the daughter of a career Swiss diplomat she was exposed to many cultures, spending her early school years in pre-war Berlin and then in Algiers, where she learned French and came to love North-African culture. She returned to Switzerland during World War II, where she studied languages and helped to care for refugee children. Just as World War II ended she joined her father, who had been named Swiss Ambassador to Argentina. While in Argentina she learned Spanish and developed her gift for painting. Having no affinity with the diplomatic life, she returned to Switzerland where she worked with Italian artists.

Her interest in world religions and spirituality brought her into contact with Frithjof Schuon, whom she married in May 1949. She accompanied her husband on all of his travels and helped him to receive visitors and answer correspondence from spiritual seekers, which brought her into contact with people from diverse religions and from across the world. She became fluent in English and conversant in Italian, in addition to the three languages of her youth: German, French, and Spanish. Along with her husband, she was adopted into the Sioux and Crow tribes.

The Schuons lived near Lake Geneva until 1980 when they moved to the United States and established themselves in the forests of Indiana. Since her husband's death in 1998 Mrs. Schuon spends several months each year traveling throughout the world to visit many of Frithjof Schuon's admirers, each time returning to the serenity of her home in the woods outside of Bloomington, Indiana.

Keith Critchlow is Professor Emeritus at the Prince of Wales Foundation in London and co-founder of the Temenos Academy. He was a former professor of Islamic art at the Royal College of Art and Founder Member of the Research into Lost Knowledge Organization. An internationally known lecturer on Islamic Art, he is the author of books on geometry, anthropology, the principles of Islamic design, and the Neolithic origins of architecture, including *Pythagorean Geometry*, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*, *Order in Space*, and *Time Stands Still: New Light on MegalithicScience*.

Barbara Perry was born on April 9, 1923 in Boston, Massachusetts, from old New England ancestry. Her father, Lauriston Ward, a "Boston Brahmin," was an anthropologist who taught at Harvard.

Barbara attended first Vassar, then Sarah Lawrence colleges, at the second concentrating in writing both poetry and prose under the tutorship of Maxwell Geismar, the New York literary critic. Later she met and married Whitall Perry—author of the opus *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*.

Meeting Whitall Perry spurred a joint interest in Eastern spirituality. They met the celebrated Orientalist, Ananda Coomaraswamy in New York, which inspired a venture East in search of a spiritual master. On their way to India, visa delays obliged them to stay in Cairo where they met the French luminary and metaphysician René Guénon, as well as the English Islamist and poet, Martin Lings, a meeting that in the case of the latter would turn into a lifelong friendship.

Settling in Egypt, in a home next to the Pyramids, the Perrys would summer in Switzerland; there they met the great metaphysician and foremost spokesman of the *Sophia Perennis*, Frithjof Schuon. Later, political unrest in Egypt forced the Perrys to move to Switzerland where they, along with their children Mark and Catherine, became next-door neighbors of the Schuons, a relationship and proximity that endured forty-six years until Schuon's death in 1998. They also undertook a number of important journeys with the Schuons across Europe, Turkey, Morocco, and the American West where the Schuons and Perrys established special bonds with members of the Sioux and Crow tribes. In 1963 Whitall and Barbara received Indian names from Benjamin Black Elk, the son of the famous Sioux medicine man.

Today Barbara, widowed in November of 2005, lives quietly in a retirement community in Bloomington, Indiana.

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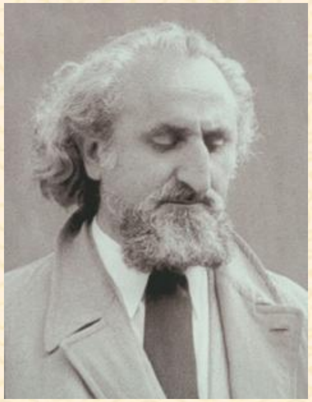

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